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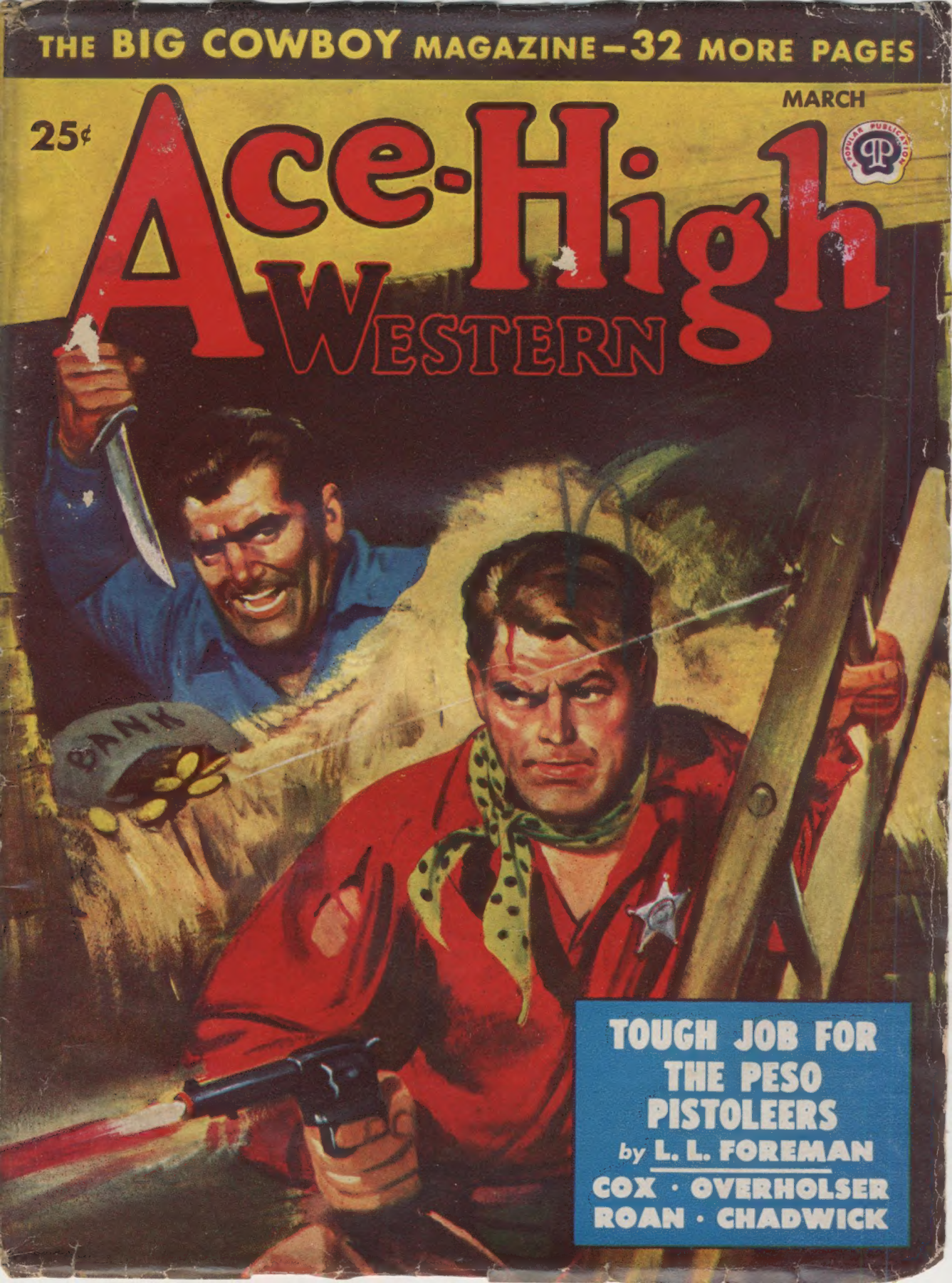

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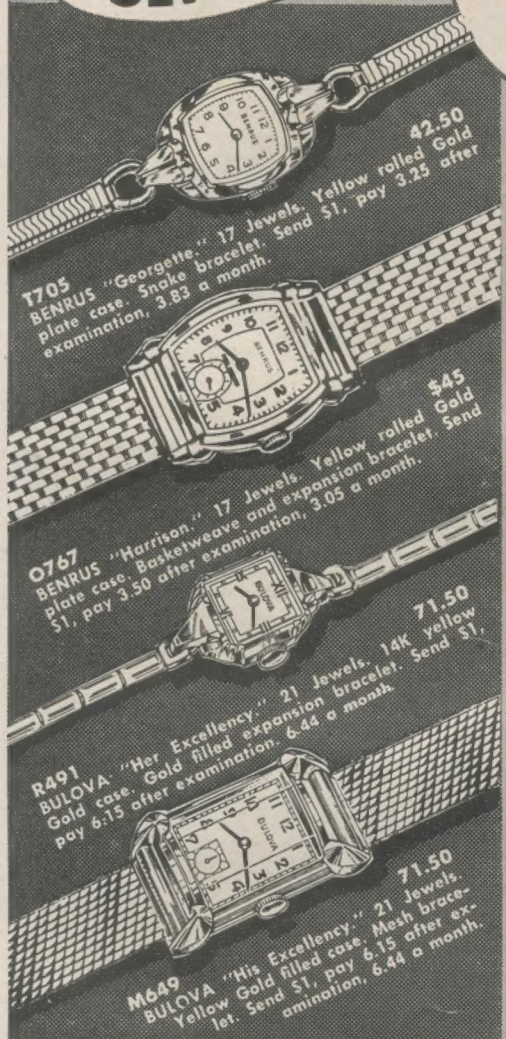

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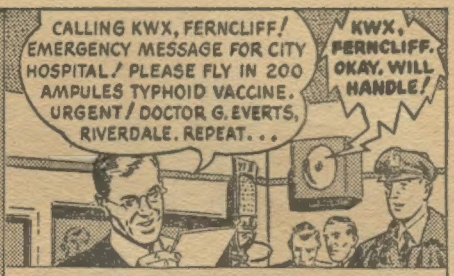
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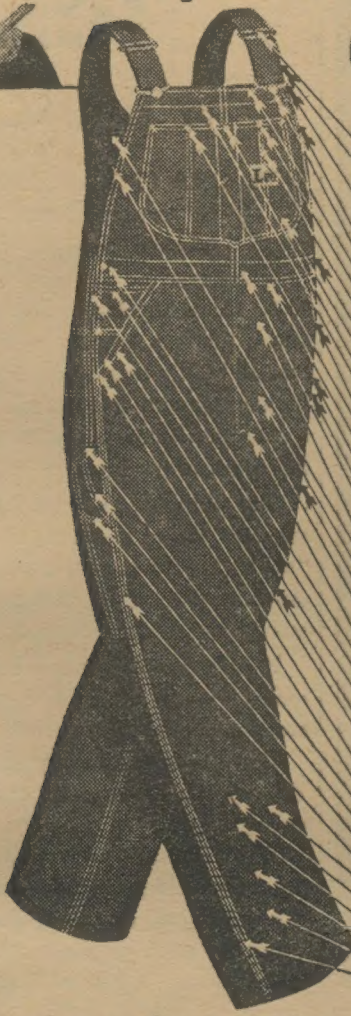

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DESERT ICE

By R. Z. ROBIN

DOES IT PAY an honest man to be tempted into some sort of crooked scheme that promises "big returns"?

As far as anything is known to the contrary, Phillip Arnold, of San Francisco, was an honest man until about 1870, when he met up with one Cooper who unfolded a marvelous plan to his ears. Cooper then faded out of the picture.

But Arnold brooded over Cooper's scheme. Being a miner, he had heard of "salting" gold mines—a common enough practice—but salting a diamond field was something else again—worth trying.

Phillip Arnold with his diamond field fooled Henry Janin, one of the greatest mining experts of the time.

The diamonds fooled Mr. Tiffany, of Tiffany and Company and he made a wrong estimate.

This, in turn, fooled W. C. Ralston, president of the bank of California out of two and a half million dollars.

Baron Rothschild's representative, A. Gansl, was "taken in" and became a member of the ten million dollar company that was formed.

For Phillip Arnold and a man by the name of John Slack had listended to Cooper's story and decided to act upon it. Arnold and Slack had saved about from thirty-five to fifty thousand dollars in mining deals.

How would it be, if Arnold should go to Europe and buy low grade diamonds, emeralds, rubies and sapphires? A fine idea thought Arnold, and in 1870, he

(Continued on page 8)

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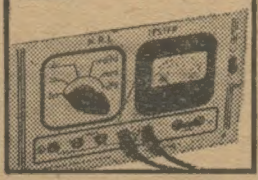
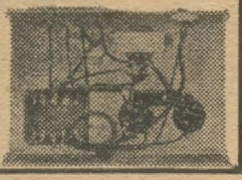


YOU TEST Radio Circuits like this built with parts I send. Build special circuits; learn how to locate and repair circuit defects.

YOU BUILD THIS Vacuum Tube Power Pack, make changes which give you experience, learn how to locate and correct power pack troubles.



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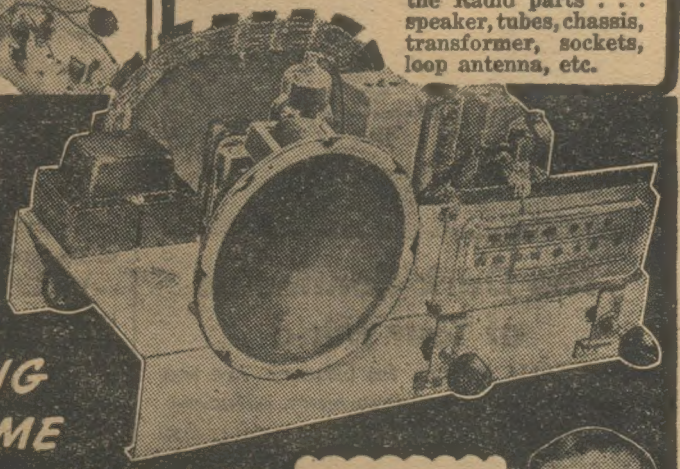

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DESERT ICE

(Continued from page 6)

bought gems in Amsterdam and London and he and John Slack "salted" a quarter of a square mile in a wild wilderness section of the American desert.

In 1871, the two weather-beaten miners left a few stones with the Bank of California to "see what would happen" and received a receipt for them.

There was some curiosity among the bank officials regarding this deposit and information soon leaked out.

George D. Roberts, who had employed Arnold in the past in mining deals, wanted to know about the gems.

Arnold told Roberts that he and Slack had found a diamond field on the American desert. Arnold told Roberts that there were also rubies, sapphires and emeralds.

Roberts introduced Arnold and Slack to the president of the Bank of California —W. C. Ralston—and another financier by the name of William C. Lent. Arnold did most of the talking and said that he and Slack would sell a half interest for a large cash amount and demanded $100,000 at once.

W. C. Ralston said that he and Lent and Asbury Harpending—a friend—would put up all the money needed, but first they must know where the diamond field was.

Arnold said that if Ralston would select two men, he and Slack would take them to the diamond field providing they went there and came back blindfolded. One of the men chosen was David C. Colton, a representative of the Southern Pacific Railroad. Colton returned telling Ralston that the place was covered with gems.

Arnold and Slack agreed to leave a sack of gems with the Bank of California for security against the cash advanced while negotiations were going on.

(Continued on page 129)

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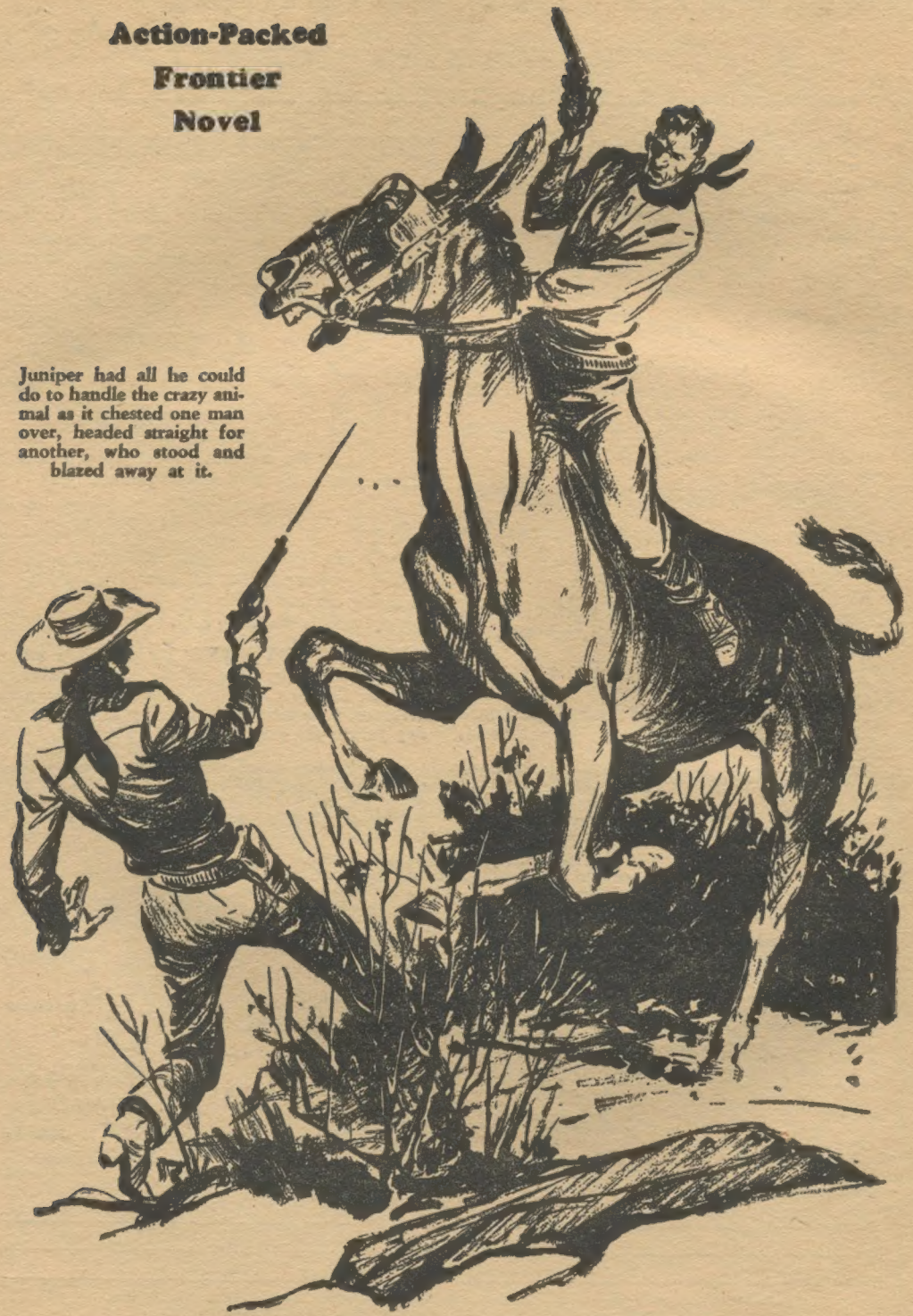
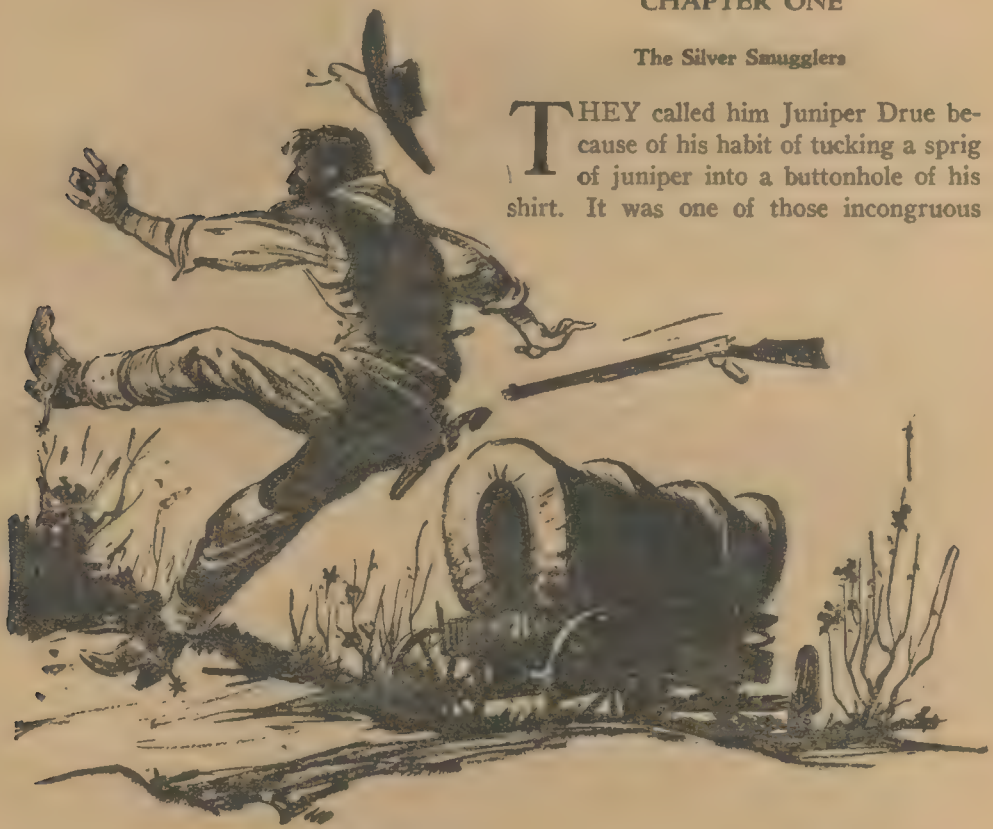


Juniper had all he could do to handle the crazy animal as it chested one man over, headed straight for another, who stood and blazed away at it.

TOUGH JOB for the PESO PISTOLEERS

A fortune in shining silver waited for the man who could tool that wagon through the bloody red hell that waited for it—and that was why he took the job. For if ever a jasper carried the passkeys to hell in his tied-down holsters, it was that straight-shooting, flower-loving, devil-may-care pilgrim, Juniper Drue!



CHAPTER ONE

The Silver Smugglers

THEY called him Juniper Drue because of his habit of tucking a sprig of juniper into a buttonhole of his shirt. It was one of those incongruous

By L. L. FOREMAN

nicknames hung upon a trifle as unimportant as the engraved pony on the butt of a loaded Colt. He had a hard, scarred face, deep-set eyes hinting of a quietly sardonic humor, and large, flexible hands. Nobody but a fool could translate his habit as a sign of tame-cat foolishness.

The dark and dirty man with the shaggy black hair was a fool. He came lumbering along the narrow boardwalk from the Escalante House, drunk and dangerous, a .44 Dragoon stuck in his belt and a buffalo gun dragging from his left hand—a mean booger with grit in his craw and burrs in his beard. Taking up all the boardwalk, he went out of his way to shoulder a boy down who didn't step aside promptly enough to suit him, and when he raised his senseless glare and caught sight of the little green sprig of juniper coming toward him he squinted at it as if it personally affronted him.

Juniper Drue didn't mind matching shoulders with him, or with anybody else who happened to be feeling big, for that matter. He was only slightly annoyed when the impact caused his aromatic nosegay to fall from his buttonhole. But when he stooped to retrieve it, and the booger put his foot on it, he decided that this nonsense had gone far enough. He grabbed the foot and jerked it high, so hard that the boot came off in his hand. He had no use for an extra boot, so he tossed it accurately at its owner.

THE BADMAN, after hitting the street with the back of his hairy neck, sat up, grunting his rage. The buffalo gun had gone sailing out of his hand, and the Dragoon pistol had slipped down into his pants. While he reached for one and dug for the other, the hard heel of the boot smacked him between the eyes and he forgot what he was looking for.

"Gee, what a spill!" the boy yipped admiringly.

"It'll do him for a while," commented Drue, carefully brushing the juniper sprig and poking it back where it belonged. He amiably dropped a couple of silver dollars down the grinning boy's neck and strolled on into the Escalante House. By the time he drew to a queen pair and made it threes, himself dealing and a well-fed pot for encouragement, the incident had faded into a long string of others in the background of his mind.

Nor did the matter register much among those who had seen it. This sun-baked town of Las Vegas, squatting on the old Santa Fe Trail where it made its fish-hook loop around the towering Sangre de Cristos of New Mexico, had known many riotous days and blazing nights. Men constantly came down that trail, bound for Texas and Old Mexico, for their own sufficent reasons. Others, shrewd speculators and adventurers with money, kept old Santa Fe as their eventual destination. The great Spanish and Mexican land grants were being broken up, offering golden chances to those who knew the profitable techniques of legal land-grabbing backed by powdersmoke.

And there were always those who, coming up the cattle trails, veered aside for a splurge, went broke, and turned to the gun to recoup their fortunes. Tough hombres were no novelty to Las Vegas. In the few days since Juniper Drue's arrival, the town had come to recognize and accept him as one of the toughest, most capable and yet most casual of all the gambling, gunfighting wanderers that had ever lit here for a spell before passing on.

The citizens regarded him with some interest. The local law watched him and hoped he'd soon drift on. The tinhorn gamblers heartily wished him dead. He had cleaned out a few of them, put incapacitating holes in a couple who placed too much reliance on sleeve-guns, and busted their neat combinations all to blazes.

It was a fine thing, he mused, raking

in the pot on his three queens, the way luck usually smiled on a man if he took the trouble to meet her halfway. The other players were also courting her fervently, of course, but they wanted too much. There was a tinhorn with a bulky left sleeve, a Colorado cowman who had believed mistakenly that he was in sucker land when he crossed south over Raton Pass, and a tall young fellow with a Louisiana drawl who bet high on four parts of a straight. They watched the pot travel yonderly.

The Colorado cowman blurted a curse, heeled back his chair and stood angrily. Juniper Drue raised a level look at him and sat motionless. The man from over Raton Pass departed, muttering belligerently but confusedly. The young Southerner, cleaned, rose quietly and walked away. The tinhorn spread his hands and shook his head, and Juniper got up and went to the bar.

As he ordered a drink and stuffed away his winnings, he was well aware that a score of eyes followed pensively the hard yellow twenties and crumpled folding money, that probably a dozen hands itched to shove a gun into his back. That was the trouble about being winner. You had to win the stakes twice, by getting out of town before the losers got you with a final round of sixes.

"Double whiskey?" inquired the bartender politely.

"Single," Juniper corrected him, just as politely. "An' from the reg'lar bottle, please—not that'n you just took from under the bar!"

THE CLEANED-OUT young Southerner came and stood near him. "I'll take two hundred for this," he said, and slid a gold watch down the polished bar to him.

Juniper Drue examined it, but mostly he paid attention to the backbar mirror. It was the fanciest watch he had ever seen or heard of. It was intricately engraved, had a painted face and was about as big as an orange. As a pocket timepiece it more nearly resembled something a man paid to dance with.

"It chimes," the young man mentioned. "It chimes real nice on the hour, half-hour and quarter."

"The hell!" Juniper eyed him curiously. "A musician!"

The young man glanced coolly at the green sprig in the buttonhole. "A flower fancier!" he retorted.

Juniper grinned. "Look, if you're broke I'll give you a twenty. But I don't want your watch."

"And I don't want your charity!" spat stung Southern pride.

Juniper shrugged. "Okay." He tossed the watch back, while his eyes reverted to the mirror.

He never knew whether it was the fault of the toss or the catch, but he heard a bang and rattle, and then the striking of a tiny gong. The magnificent timepiece lay on the floor, chiming like mad. Everybody was staring down at it, waiting for it to quit, and even the bartender leaned across the bar and cocked a scandalized eye at it. The gentle, silvery chiming went on and on, interspersed with hesitations and gasping little whirs of wheels.

The tall young man from Louisiana stepped up to Juniper. His face was stiff with anger. "You, sir," he snapped with some formality, "are called Juniper Drue, I believe—a pow'ful mighty scrapper. I am called Wade Morissey, an' I'm no cotton-boll in a fight, m'self! Shall we have it here or outside, Mr. Drue?"

Not being accustomed to such a formal approach on such a subject, Juniper allowed himself the luxury of thinking it over. He counted the chimes to forty-nine. There was no such hour. "Aw, go sit on your watch, Mr. Morissey!" he said, and two seconds later took a punch that set his ears to ringing faster than the watch.

He shook his head, struck back hard, and Wade Morissey plowed that end of the bar clear of customers, drinks and some loose change. The customers didn't like it. They weren't the kind of men to be shy about their dislikes, and after taking swings at Morissey as he rocked past and knocked them down, they fixed the blame on Juniper and came at him. The tinhorn gamblers, seeing a swell opportunity to settle scores, pitched in and tried to show everybody how to fix a troublesome man for keeps. About the only one not taking part in the riot was a cigar-chewing speculator in a plug hat, who sat looking on like Nero serenely surveying a contest between the lions and Christians.

Juniper got his back to the bar and was holding the fort in all directions except behind, when the bartender, a misguided soul with a single-track mind, tried to brain him with the special bottle from under the bar. Juniper wrenched the bottle from him, and was about to let him have it back, when he spotted a flat-heeled freighter preparing to put the boots to Morissey as a matter of principle.

He let fly with the bottle, conked the freighter, and went over the bar and landed on the bartender, who turned in his time for the day. Somebody jumped up on the backbar shelf and began hurling bottles with amazing speed and fine discrimination. It was Wade Morissey, battered but unbowed. He yelled, "Watch that cow-fellow, Drue—he's lining a gun on you!"

Juniper whipped out a bone-handled shooter, looked for the cowman, and fired. Several individuals who hadn't seen that gun before elected for the door and got stepped on by others who had. The Colorado cowman, finding his hat blown off, reached for it, but the next shot sent it higher, so he let it go and joined the outward rush.

That pulled the plug and let the riot drain out. Among those still present and conscious was the plug-hatted speculator, puffing thoughtfully at his cigar. Others, trying to appear as neutral as he, stepped sedately back to the gambling tables. In the peaceful hush that descended over the barroom, the watch tinkled a few last lingering chimes and expired.

Wade Morissey picked it up, wound it and put it to his ear. "It doesn't run," he announced and dropped it into his pocket.

"Neither do you, I notice," Juniper remarked. "Well, I still don't want it. Let's have a drink an' get out before the law comes rattlin' in!"

LEAVING the Escalante House, they found the plug-hatted speculator waiting outside. "I'm Bruno Pitt," he introduced himself. "I suggest we go around to the other door and up to my room for a while. I can promise good bourbon, no callers, and an interesting game. I may mention that the sheriff seems to be gathering deputies, down there at his office. Well?"

Juniper looked at Wade Morissey, who nodded.

They followed Bruno Pitt up to his room. He locked the door, produced bottles, glasses and cigars, bade them be comfortable, and stretched himself out on the bed. "I'm a trader and speculator," he said, peering up at the ceiling through his cigar smoke.

"In what line, Mr. Pitt?" asked Wade Morissey.

Pitt glanced aside at Juniper and smiled faintly. "Any line that offers profit. I am interested in silver, at present. My interest is centered on a wagon-load of smuggled Mexican silver which, I happen to know, is stalled down near the Llano Estacado country. A wagon-load of Mexican pesos."

"That's money," Juniper commented, trying out one of the cigars. "But how'd it get there? Smuggling silver up over the

line is profitable, but risky, They gen'rally do it with pack mules at night, an' sell on this side before daylight. That Llano Estacado country is a long haul north o' the Border, an' some tough country to cross. Mexican smugglers don't like to work so hard. That's why they're smugglers."

Pitt nodded slowly. "Right. A good point, Mr. Drue. I like a man like you. I like the way you handled that scrap downstairs. I like what I've heard about you. It's possible that something went wrong with the smugglers' plans, isn't it? And that they had to come on north, and keep on coming? Or perhaps they heard that they could sell at full coin value if they could get it far enough from the Border. And they could, too! So can I! I have the—er—facilities."

"But not the silver," murmured Wade Morissey, and combed his fingers through his crisp dark hair, smiling mistily. The bourbon was excellent, and he was getting a little drunk.

Pitt's smile was sharp, flickering. "It's there, I'm pretty sure. A man named Kiowa Hudson told me of it. He wasn't lying. I know when a man is lying to me, even a smart man, and Hudson is anything but smart. I engaged him to gather a crew of men and a string of pack mules, and to wait further instructions. He's not a man I'd trust to boss the job. I want a good man or two for that. Really good. Tough, hard-headed, intelligent. The job is to stick up those smugglers and haul the silver here."

Juniper stubbed out his cigar. It didn't taste right. He took a sniff at the green sprig in his buttonhole and rolled a cigarette. "What would it be worth?"

Pitt looked directly at him. "To you, five thousand dollars. I'll meet you with an Army wagon. We'll transfer the silver to it, and I'll drive it here. Nobody will know a thing. I'll store it in Benson's warehouse until I can make shipment up to Denver and get my price for it."

Juniper lighted his cigarette. He knew the type of man Pitt was. The title of speculator could cover many things. Whiskey peddler to the Indians, gun-runner, wet cattle dealer—all the profitable pursuits, with helpers and hirelings shouldering all the peril.

Still, five thousand dollars was heavy money. And smugglers were well outside of the law, anyhow, and often a pretty scurvy breed. Down along the Border strip they were classed about the same as wet cattle riders, and to hijack them was practically a legitimate occupation.

"Where at is that silver?" he queried.

Pitt swung his feet off the bed and sat up. "They wrecked the wagon crossing Alamogordo Creek near the Old Comanche Trail north of Fort Sumner. They patched it up, but it broke down again soon, farther north in a valley just west of the road to Santa Rosa. So Kiowa Hudson tells me. He was—er—on a trading trip through there. They were traveling by night, and after they broke down he got close enough to hear them talking. It sounds right—traveling by night and avoiding all regular routes."

He leaned forward. "Kiowa Hudson will rendezvous with his outfit at an adobe hut beside the road south of Santa Rosa, and wait. There's a corral there. You'll take charge. I'll give you a note to him. He won't like it. He thinks he's good enough to boss the job. But he'll take my orders. He's been doing it so long it's a habit. But you'd better watch him, especially if he's drinking. Got it all? An adobe hut on the road south of Santa Rosa, with a corral. . . ."

CHAPTER TWO

Hell's Freight Line

THEY couldn't have missed it if they'd tried. In fifteen miles south along the rutted road from Santa Rosa there was

only one adobe hut that looked lived in. It had a corral full of horses and mules, and in the shade of the hut sprawled the shabbiest mixture of boozy trigger-tramps Juniper had seen bunched together in a long time.

"Satan's whiskers!" exclaimed Wade. "Are those our knights of the silver fleece? I never should've left home. They *told* me I'd get into bad company!"

"They could be right," Juniper admitted. He pulled over to the edge of the yard and hailed the group. "Howdy! Is Kiowa Hudson around?"

They didn't reply. Their eyes searched him and Wade for signs of the law. At last a man appeared at the door of the hut, blinking in the strong sunlight after the windowless shade within. "Yeah, I'm here," he rumbled, and came on out. He was dark and dirty, a bearded man with shaggy black hair and a .44 Dragoon pistol stuck in his belt.

"Hell, I know this hombre," Juniper muttered. "I clunked him out with his boot, back in Las Vegas."

"With his own boot?" Wade inquired interestedly. "This gets worse and worse." He shifted to a handier balance the short Paterson carbine that Juniper had loaned him. "Ah, dear old Louisiana! Sweet New Oreleans, shall I ever set eyes on you again?"

Kiowa Hudson, the sun in his eyes, didn't recognize Juniper until they met in the yard. His reaction then was gummy, clogged by drink. "You!" he mumbled, scowling. "What the hell!"

"My name's Drue," Juniper said. His deep-set eyes bored into the dark and shaggy man. He had never seen any good come from trying to placate the lighted fuse of a powderkeg. It was best to jump on it. "Here's a note from Pitt. While you're spellin' it out, I reckon I'll just get things movin' round here!"

He swung out of the saddle and stalked to the bleary bunch. "Up on your feet, you bottle-battlers! Playtime's done passed an' there's a job to do. Throw the *aparejos* on those mules an' string 'em out. Saddle up. We're movin'!"

Like a gun-spread baron arrogantly sure of obedience, he wheeled around and jumped on Kiowa Hudson. "Does it take you all day to read a few words? Damn it, help 'em get the mules strung out! We ain't got all year!"

Wade raised his eyes heavenward and presumably prayed to his home-folks' patron saints to save the day. But the bleary bunch straggled forth and obeyed. And Kiowa Hudson, looking as if he'd been knocked on the head, bemusedly shouted orders to them and let Pitt's note flutter away in the faint breeze. He couldn't read, anyway.

Soon they strung forth, a shambling cavalcade—as Wade put it—of knights on the trail of the silver fleece. Juniper and Wade rode off to one side, on the alert. It was about the sorriest and most poisonous pack of powdersmoke pilgrims, Juniper thought meditatively, that he had ever ridden with. He saw Kiowa's bloodshot eyes constantly reverting to him; saw the senseless glare of hatred in them; saw, by the stiffening belligerence all along the straggling line, that the hatred was communicating itself to the rest of the shabby pack. The powderkeg fuse was smoldering again.

"I hate to think of camping with these mangy wolves," Wade observed. "They act like they're sore at us, don't they?"

"Don't they, though!" said Juniper. "Keep that carbine loaded an' your finger near the trigger, awake or asleep, y'hear? I wouldn't put it past Kiowa to stake me out on an ant-hill, give him the chance. He didn't get that nickname for nothin', I bet!"

THE RUTS scored the road clear on down the red-brown stretch, over the piñon and juniper hills—where Juniper

replenished his nosegay—through the cane-cactus country, and into the lower land of cottonwoods, green grass and wild purple verbena. Here the ruts turned off to leave the road and cross a wide and shallow arroyo. Then they disappeared.

Juniper wondered where they went. They were the ruts of wagon wheels. Heavy wagons, and many of them. He didn't spend much time wondering, for pretty soon Kiowa Hudson threw up a hand and growled something.

"What is it?" Wade called.

Kiowa turned a baleful look on him. "Wagon ahead. Looks like the silver wagon. Mute yer mouth, blast you!"

The wagon, a battered old vehicle with two broken wheels and no team, lay canted over up the far side of a valley through which no beaten trail ran. Below it was a stand of cottonwoods. From here on the opposite side there was a view of the banks of Alamogordo Creek. To the east rimmed the bluffs of the Llano Estacado, the Barren Staked Plains that, reaching hungrily for this land of green growth, were halted by the faithful old Pecos River.

"Wonder where the team is," Juniper said, peering through curled fingers. "Only five men there, an' their horses an' some camp stuff." He glanced at the sun. "Kiowa, take your bunch an' circle up behind 'em. Leave the mules here with a man or two."

"We'll whack their blasted heads off," growled Kiowa. "I don't need you to show me how to handle this!"

"Take it easy," Juniper snapped. "It's silver we want, not scalps. Morissey an' me, we'll prowl over an' stick 'em up. All you got to do when you get above 'em is stand by in case of a bobble. After they give up, we let 'em go, *sabe?* C'mon, Wade. Leave your horse. This is a stalkin' job, an' we got plenty time to reach there by sundown."

When they got a short distance off, Wade muttered, "I don't much like this. Crawling through brush to stick up and rob some smugglers."

"Better than stayin' with that bunch," Juniper remarked. "Come some shootin', we'd be their first targets. My idea is to get up there ahead of 'em an' run those five jiggers off. Kiowa's a kill-crazy booger, an' we'd likely tangle over that."

"From what I've heard and seen," Wade said, "you're not so slow on the trigger yourself."

Juniper's eyes glinted at him. "I never yet gunned a man who wasn't tryin' to do the same for me. Get that straight!"

He looked back, watching Kiowa and his bunch set out. They were a sorry, treacherous crew of sodden renegades. Well, a man couldn't expect to find infallible tools to work with. You did what you could with what you had. But it was galling to be classed and compared with such gun-thugs, even by a green young pilgrim too new to the country to know better. Juniper scowled and for once allowed himself to scan his long and careless back-trail.

Gunfighter and gambler, he had left his mark in more places than he could recall offhand. He guessed he was wanted here and there. It had never troubled him. But now it occurred to him that the trail might dip downhill, might be dipping now, that perhaps some day he'd be a brushy booger on the dodge with a gun in his belt, gone wolf from too many bullets, too many bottles.

"I'll never know," murmured Wade, "how you got them this far without an explosion. And I can't guess how you hope to get that silver north."

Juniper turned his thoughts to the silver. It could mean a fresh start. Once, when very young, he had given three years' work to the building of a tiny herd—and seen it wiped out in an hour by the hired riflemen of a cattle king who wanted no neighbors. He'd stalked and killed the

shooters. That had been the start of the wild and wandering trail. He would know better now, and cattle killers would know better than to rouse him up against them.

"I'll get it!" he said harshly, and Wade Morissey sent him a startled glance and looked as if he wished he weren't prowling through brush with a notorious gunfighter to rob a wagon-load of smuggled Mexican silver.

BY SUNDOWN they lay crouched behind a patch of tall soapweed, less than a hundred yards from the wagon. Juniper studied the intervening stretch, mapping the course. The cottonwoods along the bottomland had helped to give cover, but at this level they were sparse and spindly, and there wasn't much more than soapweed and beargrass to hide behind. And Wade had turned out to be no great shakes as a swift and silent stalker.

The actions of the five men near the wagon were puzzling. There they were, stalled, yet they weren't doing anything about it. They hadn't much to show for the time they'd been there. They sat on bedrolls around a spread blanket, playing cards, smoking, yawning as if they hadn't a care in the world. Only one of them was Mexican.

There had been no sign so far of the Kiowa crew. It was all right with Juniper if they never did show up. He got set to lead the crawl to the next soapweed patch, but Wade prodded him and muttered, "Up there on the hill! See it?"

Juniper saw, and swore. Somebody was waving a red bandanna on a stick as a signal, chancing its being spotted by the five men. "Of all the damn fool things! Do they think—" Juniper swung his head sharply. "Hey, what's that noise?"

The five men at the wagon had caught the sound too. They rose swiftly, catching up their rifles, and stared down the valley. Juniper and Wade froze, directly in line with the searching eyes of the five, nothing but soapweed for shelter. The noise grew rapidly louder, and suddenly out of the cottonwoods below burst the mules. Even in the graying light it was plain to see that they'd been stampeded and didn't like it. They ran high, wide and long-eared, and in their ill-temper they wanted nothing better than to kick somebody's teeth in.

When he saw two horses bucking along with the mules, and recognized them as his own and Wade's, Juniper swore some more. That waving red bandanna had been a signal, sure enough—but not to Juniper Drue and Wade Morissey.

A dozen guns up the rise opened up with a stammering, flashing roar. Bullets slashing through the thin-leafed soapweed told Juniper it was high time to vacate, although where to go he didn't quite know at the moment. The rampaging mules and their armed stampeders were coming up, the Kiowa crew was coming down, and he and Wade were in a fair way to get caught in the jam. And there were the smugglers to reckon with.

One of the five smugglers bowed over the wagon-tongue and hung there. The remaining four, after a moment's furious firing from behind the wagon, ran to their horses. Nobody could call them gun-shy, though. They were scrappers. They fired as they ran, and as their rifles emptied they flung them away and whipped out their sixguns. They mounted in good order without saddling, those afoot covering for those taking off bareback, and down the slope they came on a thundering run. And over the hill charged Kiowa Hudson and his crew.

"Make for the creek, Morissey!" Juniper yelled, but Wade didn't answer. Wade was sitting on the ground holding his head, blood trickling slowly through his fingers.

"Damn!" growled Juniper, and hauled him to his feet. "Here's where I catch us a mule—an' I never done that before!"

THEY lay muddied and torn under the bank of Alamogordo Creek in the darkness, listening for the hoofbeats of the killer crew hunting them. Kiowa Hudson and his brush boogers had gone all the way, gone berserk after their raid, and craved to catch Drue and Morissey.

It was a hell of a night. Juniper damned the bright and shining moon, and Wade held his aching head. Once, while they huddled in the mud, guns ready, they heard some of the crew riding by. "Hell's fire!" cursed one. "Empty wagon; Empty! Not a blamed peso in it: Lemme get my sixgun on that son, thassall! Damn!"

"Hear that?" Jun. whispered. "Wagon's empty!"

Wade, his head scored, mumbled foggily, "The wages of sin is death, Juniper!"

"Well, it sure ain't silver this trip," Juniper observed. "Look. Get a-hold o' y'self. We need horses. 'Member that wagon turnoff back a ways, where the ruts went east? I figure there must be a freightin' outfit—a station, maybe—somewhere 'long there. They'll have horses. C'mon!"

He dragged Wade to his feet. "I don't know why I don't just boot you into the creek. Mebby it's because I got a kind of feelin' for dogs, children an' innocent pilgrims."

"Who's a dog?" mumbled Wade.

They found the trail, stumbled along it, and crossed the rutted arroyo. Somebody —they were too weary and banged up to care who—let loose with a rifle and planted a bullet neatly between them.

Juniper said dourly, "Wait here while I go see that duck." He bent his head, listening. "No, not here. Some riders comin' up behind us. Scuttle off somewhere out o' the way till they pass."

He left Wade wandering off along the arroyo. He followed the wagon ruts up the far bank, heard the crack of the rifle again, heard the *thunk!* of the bullet near him, and veered off into the brush. Somebody was certainly guarding the arroyo crossing against strangers. Not against smugglers, though. He heard the thudding hoofbeats of four horsemen cross the arroyo without a shot to delay them, and after a wait he went looking for that rifle-shooting duck.

What he wanted was a horse, preferably a good one with a well-built saddle, to get out of this bogus silver chase and get back to constructive poker. So when he spied a horse and rider atop a ridge overlooking the arroyo, he sought no farther. The rider was looking toward the arroyo. And he, Juniper, was easing up behind. He could have blown the rider's head off, but that wasn't good etiquette. It didn't accord with that tattered and somewhat tarnished code he still persisted in holding onto.

So he jumped the rider from behind. In his leap, he grabbed the reins and was more considerate with the horse than with the rider, for he hooked an arm around the rider throwing that person to the ground. A rifle went sailing off, and so did a big hat. There was a gasp from the downed one.

"Stay there!" Juniper growled. "Reach for a pistol an' I'll foot your neck!" He held the prancing horse. "Put your arms out where I can see 'em! That's right! Now—by damn, it's a woman!"

"H-how did you know?" quavered a small voice from the recumbent victim, with what seemed a rare irrelevance.

"By your—uh—" Juniper stuttered. "Aw, call it instinct! Get up, hear me? Get up an' explain y'self," he commanded gruffly, angry at his embarassment. He had been embarrassed so rarely in his life that it was practically a new experience, not particularly an enjoyable one. "What d'you mean by shootin' at decent folks?"

From the way she regarded him as she rose hesitantly, her idea of decent folks

was radically different from his. And she was no woman, he perceived, after she stood before him. She was a girl, a slight young bit of a thing no bigger than what a healthy wolf could take in one gulp.

He was a wolf in some ways, but not in others, so he didn't swallow her. He just scared her half to death with his chill stare and enquired, "Who're you, an' who let you run out this time o' night?"

He made another mistake there. She wasn't that young, as he soon found out. She was maybe nineteen or twenty, and she wasn't letting any stray roughneck bawl her out as if she was a kid, even though she had taken a couple of close shots at him. "I'm Tally Howe," she told him with dignity, "and I run the H-L freight line."

"Tally-ho, an' she runs the hell freight!" Juniper muttered. "By damn, what next? Look, gal, give your right name an' occupation, whatever 'tis—I ain't the law!"

"Tally Howe," she repeated distinctly. "Miss Talitha Howe to you!"

"Oh!" he said. "Well, look, Miss Tally-ho, stand right there while I call another crackpot up from the arroyo. He's Wade Morissey. He's green as grass, but he just might know where to take a-holt on this here situation. Hey, Morissey, come here, quick!"

"Huh?" Wade's voice came spookily up from the arroyo, with echoes. "Did you get that shooter?"

"I don't know what I got," returned Juniper. "Come up here!"

Wade came clambering up. Whether it was from dizziness or an equally dizzy Southern chivalry, Juniper couldn't tell, but Wade promptly took off his hat, bowed like a gentleman, and said a bit breathlessly, "How d'you do? My name is Wade Morissey."

"I already told her," put in Juniper irritably. "Hers is Tally-ho, she says, of all damn things. An' she claims she runs hell's freight!"

"The H-L!" Tally Howe corrected him frigidly. "The Howe and Lindson Freight Line, running from Fort Sumner to Santa Rosa and points north. Mr. Lindson died three years ago. My father, Mr. Howe, died last year. Gunmen like you, hired by a rival freight line, burned down our headquarters in Fort Sumner. This station is now the H-L headquarters, and I'm running it! Is that clear, Mr.—?"

"Drue," said Juniper. "They call me Juniper Drue."

She inclined her head. "Juniper Drue, the noted gunman," she acknowledged sweetly. "That accounts for your—hmm—rough manners, Mr. Drue."

"I guess it does," Juniper said. He thought of the dip in the trail, and of Kiowa Hudson. "Yeah, I guess it does. Well, let's get along to your headquarters. We could use a drink an' a restin' spell, my *caporal* an' me. Here's your horse. Don't spur it up, please. I'd hate to shoot it out from under you. I always do hate to shoot a horse. So take it easy, 'cause we're afoot. We been rushed enough tonight!"

CHAPTER THREE

Sundown Sibley

THE HEADQUARTERS house was new, built of logs chinked with adobe, used by the girl as living quarters and office. It was located a considerable distance from the bunkhouse and mule corrals, and Juniper approved it on that score. The girl showed good sense in locating her house well away from the noise and odors of the freight station.

At that, the raucous braying of mules awakened Juniper before sunup from a light but comfortable sleep on a couch. He drew on his boots and stepped out quietly for a look around. The sun was up, and so was Wade, when he returned.

Wade was sitting outside the house,

gazing dreamily up at the fresh blue sky. He had a bandage on his bullet-ripped head and a silly look on his face. "She's cooking breakfast," he said almost reverently. "She's wonderful. Imagine a girl like that all alone in the world, running a freight line in this kind of country!"

"I can imagine she makes it pay, too," Juniper said dryly. He pointed down at the station. "See that loaded wagon with the tarp over it—the one they're tryin' to hitch those damn mules to? I took a look in it, before light. There's our silver!"

Wade jumped to his feet. "I don't believe it! There's a mistake! She's no smuggler!"

Juniper shrugged. "I didn't say she was. I just say the silver is in that wagon—one of her wagons. An' her men loaded it an' are ready to take off. An' last night she fired on us but let those four smugglers pass. An'," he added, "those hombres down there pack guns an' look like no teamsters I ever saw before!"

His faint grin was cynical, hard. "They know we're here. See 'em lookin' up at us? They don't like it we're here. Any time, now, they'll come up for a visit—likely with a gunsmoke introduction, so get that rifle I loaned you an' keep it handy!"

He stopped speaking as Tally Howe came out onto the porch. She wore a simple dress, and by daylight it could be seen that she had frank, humorous eyes and a generous, laughing mouth. Her face was flushed from the heat of the kitchen stove, and she looked like some lucky duck's young bride.

Juniper turned away. A man could lose his head over a girl like this. He had never had much fancy for the sleek and showy dance-hall queens, the women who belonged to his kind of world. They liked him, liked his careless spending, but not one had ever had the right to hang on his arm and demand where he was going next. But a girl like this . . .

Wade went to her hurriedly, pulling off his hat. "Miss Howe," he blurted foolishly, "my—uh—friend here has just made an—an outrageous charge against you. Tell me one thing, and I'll call him a liar and take the consequences. That wagon down there—is there silver in it?"

Her eyes cooled. "As it happens, there is, although I don't see what concern it is of yours! You must have been prying!"

While Wade fell back a step, Juniper laughed shortly. "Want to call me a liar, Morissey?"

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The girl said, "The silver is being shipped north. Mr. Sibley has charge of it. Because of its value, Mr. Sibley doesn't want any news of the shipment to be known. Your snooping is quite unfortunate!" She was as crisp as a banker's secretary.

"Sibley?" Juniper said. "Sibley?"

"Mr. Sibley is a government official," Tally Howe informed him, like a schoolmarm speaking of the capital of North Dakota to a small and ignorant pupil. "The silver has been sent by the Mexican Government to the U. S. Government, in payment to balance the—er—to balance the —er—trade balance. Mr. Sibley can explain it to you, as he did to me. The matter is very private and confidential. On his request, I even sent my teamsters to Fort Sumner to get them out of the way."

"Yeah?" Juniper murmured.

"Yeah—I mean yes," she said frigidly, brushing a stray curl from her forehead. "Mr. Sibley allows only his own trusted men to handle the silver. They have transferred it from their own wagon—which broke down—to one of mine. Mr. Sibley will request you, I'm sure, to keep your knowledge of the silver strictly confidential."

"I'm sure o' that, too," said Juniper. "Is that him comin' up here?"

"That," replied Tally Howe, glancing down the slope, "is he."

Juniper nodded. "Thank you. I think I know him."

"You do?" Wade inquired, astonished. "You know a government official?"

Juniper wagged his head. "No. But I do know a slick-talkin', fast-shootin' son of a bewitched buzzard by the name o' Sundown Sibley—an' if this ain't him comin', I'll take up a homestead! Get round the house, bub—he's poison!"

THE VISITOR came riding up slowly. He was neither young nor old. He was ageless, and his white hair and boyish face seemed somehow not too incongruous. Slim, immaculately clad to the point of elegance, his was the kind of presence that could impress anybody. His colorless eyes were incapable of any expression, while his smooth face was as mobile as a rubber doll's.

He doffed his hat. He bowed in the saddle. He said softly, "Miss Howe, forgive me for this intrusion. I know that you have helped greatly. I deeply appreciate, on behalf of our nation, your noble effort last night to guard our silver against the rascally plot of raiding renegades. Yet I see this morning two strangers by your house. May I ask who are they?"

Juniper stepped around the corner, Wade back of him. "You cert'nly may! Why, hell, Sundown, we don't need no introducin'!"

Sundown Sibley, gun-shark and bandit, took a quick breath and stared impassively at Juniper. Never a man to lose his nerve, he finally smiled. *"Hola,* Juniper! *Com' 'sta?"* They had met just once, over flaming guns, and lived to crawl away and fight again another day. That was in the Estancia war. Some of Juniper's scars came of that day of meeting, and Sundown's smile was a crooked thing dating from the bullet that cut his cheek.

Juniper said ironically, "So you're workin' for the gov'ment now, eh? Uncle Sam is sure broadminded!" He kept the fingers of his right hand touching holster-leather, and so did Sundown Sibley. They eyed each other with cold, bright speculation, while Wade stepped quickly into the house and reappeared with the Paterson carbine.

Down at the freight station the mules grudgingly surrendered their independence and leaned into the harness at the crack of the driver's whip. The wagon swung around, displaying the H-L sign painted on its side, and went trundling off toward the arroyo crossing, a squad of armed men riding behind it.

"Better watch out for an hombre named Kiowa Hudson an' his crew," Juniper advised. "They'll dry-gulch your boys an' grab that wagon, give 'em half a chance."

Sundown Sibley's colorless eyes rested on him. "Same crew who jumped the busted wagon last night, eh?" He chuckled lightly. "Sure was a dry trip, that! I guess you're rodding 'em, eh?"

"I was," Juniper admitted. "But there was a kind o' mutiny. Anyhow, I think you better turn that wagon back. Look, Sundown, I *sabe* your game. With a reg'lar freight-line wagon you hope to get by without notice. You've given Miss Tally-ho, here, a slick line o' talk an' hired that wagon from her. I don't doubt you've talked her into writin' you a clean bill to carry, in case any law stops an' questions you on the way. That right, Miss Tally-ho?"

"Why—yes," the girl assented, beginning to look troubled. "I wrote out the usual bill of—"

"Sure," said Juniper. "A lowdown trick, Sundown! I'm s'prised at you." He spoke banteringly, but his deepset eyes were stony. "As you know durn well, if there's a bobble—if the law ever catches on to what's in that wagon—the backfire will scorch her. They'll never believe her innocent o' complicity in silver smugglin'—a mighty serious federal offense! She'll be ruined. An' there'll be a bobble, I can tell you that, 'fore you get very far!"

"What makes you think so?" Sibley queried softly.

"Kiowa Hudson an' his crew know what's in that wagon," Juniper answered. "So does a gent named Pitt, in Las Vegas. So do I. With that many in the know, you're crazy if you figure to get by with it. The word will spread, an' all the law in the country will know that a cargo of smuggled Mexican silver is comin' up the trail."

He turned to the girl. "It's your wagon. You better put in a word right now, if you don't want federal lawmen after you."

"I hardly know what to believe," she said. "Mr. Sibley, I'm afraid I must require you to go and bring the wagon back. Then I'll get in touch with the proper authorities and they'll have to decide the matter. I'm sorry, but you can see the position this puts me in."

Sundown Sibley inclined his head. "No apology needed, Miss Howe. I respect your—uh—integrity." He was apparently unperturbed, and to read his eyes was impossible. "I'll go and turn the wagon back. Meantime, if you care to look into the bunkhouse you'll find on the table a—a gift from me." He coughed self-consciously. "A—uh—small token of my personal regard for you," he said hurriedly, and wheeled his horse and rode down after the wagon.

"We'll never see him or the wagon," predicted Wade.

Juniper sniffed his green nosegay. "Prob'ly not. Kiowa will jump the outfit. Then's when we'll move in."

Tally Howe, after a momen's hesitation, began walking down the slope to the bunkhouse. The two men watched her go. A gift, Juniper had noticed, to a woman was irresistible, even from a scalawag. Women were so damned sentimental. He sniffed his sprig again, deploring sentimentality meanwhile.

"She's wonderful!" Wade breathed.

"Nobody's wonderful," Juniper contradicted. "We're all just folks. What's wonderful about her? Hell, if she got in a jackpot right now, I wouldn't think more of it than if she was— Hey, what's he up to? Why, that sneakin' son! Damnit, gimme that carbine, quick!"

He didn't get hold of the carbine soon enough, and Sundown Sibley, bursting out of the cottonwoods along the arroyo, streaked across bare ground on the dead run. Tally Howe, walking afoot to the bunkhouse, evidently couldn't decide on which way to jump, for the horse was

plunging straight at her. Sibley slewed his horse around in a skittering, dust-raising miracle of reckless riding, and with one arm scooped her up as deftly as a Sioux brave rescuing a wounded brother from a battle.

Juniper triggered the Paterson carbine, but he had to fire low, and he missed the horse's legs and saw his bullet kick a tiny spurt of dust beyond. Then horse, rider and captured burden were rocking back into the thick cottonwoods, and Wade was running down the slope on foot, unarmed. And Juniper, dropping the carbine, went sprinting to the corrals for a horse, snarling oaths like a man robbed of everything that mattered.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Devil's Segundo

JUNIPER had never cared much for mules, and this one that he rode bareback didn't raise his opinion of them. It had the gait of a galloping goat, and riding it was like straddling a rail. But it was the best mount he could find in the corrals, and he'd been in too much of a hurry to furnish it with more than a rope hackamore.

He rode headlong through the cottonwoods, but when he got to the arroyo the mule stopped short, shot its ears at it, and refused to cross. Where Wade was now, Juniper couldn't tell, and there was no sign or sound of Sibley's horse. He heard, though, far off, the crunch and rattle of the wagon's wheels. They ceased while he listened, and he guessed that Sibley had caught up with his outfit.

He turned and pushed on along the arroyo bank. The mule, a fool of habit, wouldn't go over until it reached and recognized the regular crossing. Then it trotted over, prim as an old maid parading down her own garden walk, while Juniper kept his eyes darting for an ambush. He heard once an enraged shout, chopped off short, and he muttered bleakly, "There goes our bold Wade Morissey—head-first into a jackpot!"

After that there was complete silence. The rutted wagon track wound on toward the trail, hedged on both sides by thick growths of soapweed and tornillo, broken here and there by open patches of grass and wild purple verbena. It all appeared peaceful and lonesome, clouds of buffalo gnats buzzing in the sun, and occasionally the brilliant blue flash and harsh call of a swooping piñon jay.

Yet he had an uneasy feeling of being followed as well as being awaited. His senses hummed tautly, and insistently his instinct for danger gonged the alarm, warning him of bloody violence lurking in the hush. He rode on warily, damning the mule's noisy pace, but knowing better than to set himself afoot against well-mounted and well-armed men in the brush.

The wagon stood deserted in the tracks, its mule-team dozing. It loomed up unexpectedly ahead of Juniper as he came to a brush-choked bend, and he pulled at once on the hackamore. His mule didn't respond. It cocked its ears at the wagon team, and trotted doggedly on to join up and swap snorts. And, in so doing, it somewhat nonplussed the armed men who lay in hiding. They didn't figure any man was fool enough to ride straight on to the wagon, least of all Juniper Drue.

The soapweed and tornillo abruptly bloomed smoke-puffs, and the lonesome peace fled in the uproar. The first volley was erratic, too hasty. A bullet grazed Juniper's mule and changed its mind about joining the team. Uttering an outraged squeal, it swapped ends and took off back for home, its ears laid flat and neck stretched like a camel.

Juniper, nearly getting a permanent twist in his spine from the lightning turnabout, clamped his long legs and hung on, for once perfectly willing to agree with the

mule. He reversed his decision only when more heads bobbed up in the brush, bent over gunsights trying to get lined on him, and spotted them as Kiowa Hudson and his renegade crew.

Some of the guns spat his way, an instant after he bowed flat and hugged the mule's neck. The mule, thoroughly annoyed and confused, quit the wagon track and charged full tilt into the brush. It chested a scrambling man over, knocked down and trampled another who, ignorant of crazy mules, stood and blazed his gun at it, and tore on through the brush with a fine disregard for scratches to itself and rider.

It wasn't controllable until it gained the arroyo crossing. By then the Sibley outfit and the Kiowa crew were raising busy blazes with a brush-fight, the silver-loaded wagon the prize of victory. Juniper, not flattering himself that it was he who had overcome the mule's cantankerous spirit, got himself unloaded and stood clear.

The mule, all four feet planted in the sand of the arroyo crossing, and three bullet-holes in its chest, stood and let out one magnificent bugling bray of independence. Then it sank down and rolled over, and Juniper said, "By damn, I'll never cuss a mule again, so help me!"

HE WAS alone in the arroyo. Pretty soon he heard the wagon coming at a jangling, lurching run, and he ducked off out of the way. The wagon came rocking and swerving down the ruts, its driver laying on the whip, horsemen strung out behind it and shooting rearward. The Sibley outfit, hard pressed and outnumbered, had managed to break through and were making for the arroyo as the best place for a stand. They were tough and capable, and they were keeping their heads cool in the hot pinch.

They piled into the arroyo, slewed the wagon around and stalled it, and crowded behind it, yanking rifles and carbines from saddle scabbards. Wade was among them, staggering dazedly, another raw scar on his head from a gun butt. So was Sundown, but they carried him and set him down, senseless. Tally Howe wasn't there.

She wasn't there. Juniper stalked out of the cottonwoods. "Where's the girl? Damnit, where is she?" His voice cut harshly into their mutterings.

They twisted around and stared at him. Some of them, chronically on the prod, lowered hard glances to his hands, saw them filled with bone butts, and sighed futile regret. To down the notorious Juniper Drue could make a man big in the esteem of the gunsmoke world.

One of them said, "Horse fell, shot. Sundown landed on his head. We got him clear, but nobody could get to the gal. She's pinned under the horse, back there." He sounded both defiant and apologetic. Others behind the wagon slid their eyes away from Juniper's chill glare. None of them was proud of having left the girl behind for Kiowa to catch. Probably they had all left it to one another to pull her out, with the usual result: nobody had done it, and the blame for it shuttled back and forth.

Wade said thickly, suddenly comprehending through his haze, "I'm going back for her!"

"You are like hell, you blundering boxhead!" Juniper flung at him, and went racing on foot up the arroyo. The Kiowa crew were snaking through the brush alongside the wagon track, slamming shots at the arroyo, and the only chance was to try to circle around them to their rear. Maybe they hadn't found Tally yet in their eager hurry after the wagon. Maybe it was still worth a try. . . .

He had left the arroyo and was crawling through the thin-bladed soapweed when he became aware of somebody crawling up behind in his tracks. He sliced his

gun around and got ready to shoot, but it was Wade. His stare at the young Southerner was baleful. "If you cave in, you stay where you fall, y'hear?"

Sweating and shaking with fatigue, Wade crawled up to him. "Go to hell! Have you located her yet? I'm lost in this damned brush."

"You would be!" grunted Juniper. "Stay back o' me, an' try not to make more noise than a deaf man can hear. Got a gun?"

"No."

"Then what good are you? Here, take one o' mine. An' mind you take good care of it. I'll want it back."

They prowled on together, the firing back at the arroyo a thudding racket drowning out minor sounds. Juniper, his trained sense of direction unshaken by emergency, paused and said quietly, "She should be somewhere around here. Over there's where the wagon was halted. An' there's a dead man."

"Where?" Wade asked.

"Right beside you, you blind booger!" Juniper snapped, and risked rising for a quick look around. "There she is—an' I only hope her legs ain't broke under that dead horse," he muttered. "Why don't folks learn how to fall clear, anyhow!"

"Why, you—you rock-hearted gunman, she's a girl!" Wade whispered. "Don't you understand?"

"I most cert'nly do!" said Juniper, and Wade, catching the tone, stiffened and drew a sharp breath.

A rifle spanged suddenly. Part of a narrow soapweed leaf, bullet-cut, fell past Juniper's face. "Somebody else 'pears to be after her," he observed, and then a rifle from a different quarter cut loose. "More'n one! Stay flat, bub, or you'll get your damn head blown off!"

"How about blowing *their* heads off?" queried a smooth voice, and Sundown Sibley came crawling up, a grazed lump on his forehead, but otherwise sound and in his right mind. He grinned amiably at Juniper. "Let's bust 'em, eh? We got to get the lady out of her embarrassin' predicament!"

JUNIPER aimed a long look at him. It occurred to him that Sundown could have blasted his backbone without much effort. He met Sundown's eyes, exchanged a grin. They could understand each other. They were a couple of hard-bitten lobos on the look for loot, condemned by respectable folks and marked by the law. But they could join forces in a desperate gamble to save a girl who didn't mean a dollar to them. They were that tough and ornery.

"Work over to the left," Sundown said. "I'll work to the right. The green boy stays here. Set?"

"Set," said Juniper. "Let's get those long-gun larrigans!"

He worked over to the left, judging every move and watching all points, knowing that Sundown was doing the same on the right. A hunched shoulder and a head reared up in response to the coolly purposeful bobbing of his hat, and he fired fast, saw the head jerk back, and a moment later heard Sundown pull a like trick on his side.

They came together, within speaking distance of the girl. She lay with her legs caught under the dead horse. Juniper said, "I think there's another'n somewhere around. Cover me while I get her loose, eh?"

"Sure," said Sundown. "Make it quick. They must've heard our shots. They'll be coming."

Juniper ran forward. He grasped the stiffening legs of the dead horse and heaved, rolled it over. A shot roared from Sundown's sixgun. Somebody gave out an angry, broken cry and crashed floundering through the dry brush. Sundown called, "Make it quick, feller—I hear 'em coming!"

Tally's legs weren't broken, but they were numbed to a temporary paralysis. Juniper picked her up. She was a lot less panicked than he thought a girl could be under the circumstances, but when he felt her trembling he knew she was desperately holding on to her courage.

They raced back to where they had left Wade. Juniper, running in a crouch and carrying Tally, barged full into Wade and knocked him sprawling. They flopped down, listening to Kiowa's boogers creeping up through the brush. A tiny whir sounded, followed by a silvery chime. It was a small and muted note, but in the taut hush it seemed as clear and distinct as a church bell.

Sundown Sibley glared around, guns unholstered, for once rattled. "What the hell's that?" he whispered urgently.

Wade dug the wayward watch from his pocket. The shock of his fall had evidently started it off. He looked wildly around for a place to throw it, while it went right on steadily chiming with all the smug assurance of a brat reciting a school piece. Juniper plucked it from his hand and dropped it unnoticed into one of Sundown's emptied holsters.

"Let's get out o' here!" Sundown muttered worriedly. He hadn't seen the watch. "Damn place is spooked!" He went scuttling off through the brush, chiming on his way, and the creeping men, who had paused astounded to listen, took after the music-making gunman in a rush.

A minute later, listening to gunfire and faint tinkles, Juniper picked up Tally again and nodded to Wade. "That drew 'em off. I reckon the way's fairly clear to the arroyo now."

They made it to the arroyo and joined the shooters behind the wagon. Pretty soon Sundown came sliding fast over the bank, still chiming, his guns smoking, looking considerably angry and puzzled. As he landed in the sand, the watch tumbled out of his holster. He lay staring at it.

At last he raised his eyes to Juniper. "Cute trick," he said thinly.

Juniper nodded. "Sure is, though I wouldn't want to lug it around," he remarked blandly. "That ringin' would get on my nerves!"

Sundown got up. He kicked the watch away. He reloaded his guns. He kept them in his hands and said, "Okay, *amigo*, you hung a bell on me. Now I'll hang one on you! Keep your hands clean! Don't reach for that gun! Me and the boys might forget there's a lady present!"

He was smiling now. He said, "Look. We jumped a smuggling outfit down on the Border and took this silver off 'em. We've brought it a long way. We figure to trade it for good United States spending money and take a hard-earned rest. The trick is to get it past the law. That's where the lady is going to be a big help

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to us. She'll ride that wagon—Miss Howe, boss of the H-L Freight Line—and vouch our way through with her personal presence!"

"She won't!" Wade vowed. "She'll never do it!"

Sundown went on smiling. "You miss the point, green boy. Drue gets it. He's smart. He knows we can pull out with the wagon and smoke our way through if we have to. We can leave you three behind, without guns or horses, for those Hudson hoodlums to catch and cut up. They're not nice folks, son. I doubt they'd respect the lady. Eh, Drue? Now, don't go for that gun. I think you shot it empty, anyhow—and we're all watching you!"

"Don't be too sure it's empty!" Juniper said.

"I never get too sure of anything," Sundown assured him. "I do know, though, we went through hell getting the silver up this far, and we're ready to do just about anything to cash in on it! You *sabe* that, don't you? Okay, I'd like your help to clean out that Hudson mob. I need the lady to vouch for us. As for the green boy—well, he's got an honest face, and it wouldn't do any harm to have him along."

A Kiowa man, overly ambitious, poked the muzzle of a rifle over the arroyo bank. Sundown tilted a gun and fired. The rifle fell, and there was a threshing noise in the brush. Sundown's smile grew brighter.

"Make your choice, Drue," he murmured. "You and the lady and the green boy. You stay here for the fun of that mob. Or you ride with us and help us get the silver through!"

"I need a horse," said Juniper.

"*Bueno!*" Sundown chuckled. "We've got spares. Before we start, though, let's get the thing straight. You swear to help me get the silver through, till it's sold—you and the lady, and the green boy?"

Juniper glanced at Tally. So did Wade. Their eyes met, and Juniper nodded. "Yeah, hell take you—I swear to it!" he said savagely, and knew that for the first time in his life he had traded away his liberty.

Sundown's chuckle was almost boyishly gleeful. "*Bueno!* I hereby make you my segundo—and I hope you appreciate the honor and do a good job! Juniper Drue—my segundo! Damn, I'm sure going to enjoy this! I sure am!" He rubbed the old bullet scar on his cheek. "Yeah, I sure am!"

CHAPTER FIVE

Bullet Bargain

THEY lay in darkness that night behind the wagon. Twice they had tried to dash out of the arroyo, and both times had been driven back with losses. The Kiowa crew, experienced in the dark arts of brush fighting and bushwhacking, held the upper hand. Far up the rise the freight station and house were burning, throwing a red glare up to the sky, outlining any Sibley man who raised his head to shoot over the arroyo bank.

Juniper eased over to Sundown. "Tougher'n you thought, this! I keep hearin' mules. Kiowa must've gathered those mules up."

"Damn the mules!" grunted Sundown.

"You just don't know 'em," Juniper told him. "Mules can stampede faster'n steers, kick harder, an' raise more hell in gen'ral. I know. I've seen 'em. That bunch in partic'lar."

He caught the shine of Sundown's eyes in the dark. "Think we could do it?" Sundown asked.

"We could try," said Juniper. "Tip your boys off first."

"Ah, what a segundo!" breathed Sundown. "The best!"

The mules were tied to a picket line, but a sharp knife soon fixed that.

"Guns out!" Juniper whispered, and raised a fearful yell.

The mules flattened their ears and took off yonderly in the direction they happened to be headed, which was along the arroyo bank. Neither brush nor darkness, nor the yells of men, could stem the onward surge of their predestined course. They ran with necks stretched, teeth bared, and nimble heels ready to kick the begorry out of any stupid human not alert enough to duck.

"Wagon!" snapped Juniper, and Sundown blazed three shots and yelled.

Somewhere along the arroyo bank there was chaos and shouting confusion. Juniper and Sundown, following hard after the runaway mules, came upon men who weren't quite sure what had happened or who had knocked them down. The wagon lurched out of the arroyo on the dead run, riders firing on both sides, bulling it through. Juniper caught a glimpse of a bearded, shaggy head above a wildly bucking horse and slung a shot at it, saw it twist and bump awkwardly before it got heaved out of the saddle like a limp and short-weight sack of grain. "There goes Kiowa!" he said.

"Good segundo!" exclaimed Sundown, and with two shots spilled two men.

In clear sunlight they pushed onward toward Las Vegas, a gun squad on the sharp prod, with a wagon-load of stolen silver and a girl on the seat. They had ridden openly through Santa Rosa, crossed the Pecos, passed Starvation Peak, and now Las Vegas lay dead ahead.

Wade asked, "Is that a wagon coming down the road?"

"Yeah," replied Juniper, who had spied it long ago. "Army wagon. Bet it's Bruno Pitt."

It was. The speculator pulled his horse-drawn wagon out to let the northbound party pass, and only when they came close together did he recognize Juniper and Wade. Frowning puzzledly, he scanned the Sibley squad, the freight wagon and the girl. He motioned Juniper over to him. "What's this?" he queried curtly. "Where are the pack mules? Where's Hudson?"

"The mules stampeded," Juniper said briefly, "an' your man got sort o' stepped on. This is a better bunch, anyhow. The silver's in the wagon—forty boxes o' pesos."

Pitt brightened. "That's all that matters. Forty boxes?" His eyes glittered. "Good! I'll pay you off in Las Vegas."

"You'll pay me off now," Juniper corrected him gently. "As I recall, that was our agreement, wasn't it?"

"I haven't got it with me," Pitt protested.

"You haven't got the silver, either," said Juniper, with entire truth.

Angrily, Pitt produced a thick wad of bills wrapped in newspaper. He obviously hoped to rig up some kind of doublecross, if the opportunity came, and hang onto the money. He belonged to the grasping breed that always wanted to take all and give nothing. "Bring the wagon into Las Vegas after dark," he snapped. "There's a state marshal in town."

With practically no injury to his conscience, Juniper took the packet and shoved it inside his shirt. "You take it in, Pitt. It's your baby now." He touched his horse and moved off.

Muttering oaths, Pitt stood up in his wagon. "All right, men!" he bellowed commandingly. "No need to transfer the load to my wagon!"

Sundown Sibley, who had thought that Pitt had merely called Juniper over to inquire the road or something, gazed wonderingly at the plug-hatted, frock-coated speculator. "Well, I guess there isn't!" he observed. "Say, Drue, who's the crazy bug?"

Juniper shrugged. "Just a crackpot who wants to own the world, I figure."

Pitt gestured impatiently for attention. "Follow my wagon! I'll lead. We pull into Las Vegas after dark and unload at Benson's warehouse." He took up the lines

and tooled his team around. "Remember, now, we're not pulling in till after dark, so take it easy!"

"So you say!" commented Sundown, and flipped a gun out and fired four casual shots under the team. Some of his men, getting into the playful mood, spurred around the Army wagon, whooping and shooting off their guns.

The team promptly bolted. Pitt, jerked off his seat by the sudden lunge, toppled backward into the wagon, coat-tails flapping, too startled to let out more than an indignant peep. The lines went astray, the team settled down for a hard run, and the wagon went bouncing and careening up the road and out of sight.

"I guess he'll get to Las Vegas before dark, at that rate!" Sundown remarked. "Crazy jigger!"

In the commotion Juniper rode up alongside the freight wagon. "Tally-ho, I want you to take this," he said quietly, and handed her the wrapped packet of money. "I want you to be ready to duck out with Wade soon's I tell you. Hear? This jaunt is due to end in a blow-up."

She looked down at him from her high seat. Her eyes were grave and steady. "And what will happen to you?"

"Me?" He forced a grin. "Oh, I'll get along."

AT SUNDOWN they pulled into Las Vegas and put the wagon in the livery stable for the night. The sheriff gave Juniper a hard look. So did the Escalante House bartender, and a note besides. The note was from Bruno Pitt. It read: "You can't get away with this, Drue. Come up to my room.

Juniper passed the note to Sundown Sibley. "He's a feller who buys silver," he mentioned.

Sundown cocked an eyebrow. "If his price is right, why not? Let's go see him, segundo!"

After they tapped on Pitt's door, and it opened, Sundown exclaimed, "Damn, this is the same crazy hombre we stompeded!"

"So it is," murmured Juniper, and pushed him on in.

There were four men sitting on the bed. They were armed, and they barely raised their eyes from the floor. Pitt didn't bother to introduce them. He cut straight to the point. He said, "I can stir up the law here. North, you'd have to pass through Wagon Mound, Springer, Maxwell, Raton and Trinidad. I can stir up the law there, too. By no way I know of can you get past here with that silver. Do we talk business?

Sundown Sibley, at once on the alert, walked like a cat to the table and poured himself a drink. He queried softly, "What's this, segundo? Wouldn't cross me, would you? My boys are watching the girl. You passed me your oath you'd side me till I sold the silver. So did the girl. So did the green boy. What's this?"

"This," said Juniper, "is where you sell out, I guess. My word's good. The man talks sense. Ask him his offer."

"I've already paid out five thousand," Pitt complained bitterly, and Sundown cut a keen look at Juniper. "I'll pay another five thousand, not a dollar more."

Somewhere outside, a shotgun boomed. The four gunmen sitting on the bed moved slightly and slowly relaxed again. Sundown stepped to the window and peered out. "Five thousand? Damn it, man, there must be eighty thousand in that wagon!"

Pitt nodded. "Sure, if you could sell it. But you can't, and I can. A word from me, and the law grabs you!"

Sundown came back from the window. "Ten thousand!"

"Five—and you're lucky to get it!"

Sundown drummed his fingers on the table. "Lord preserve me from dealing with traders! Okay, five it is! Give me the money! Segundo, I want that five thousand from you, too. Don't forget I

got the lady. I think you're gone on her. I don't blame you. She'll do to take along, all right."

Somebody spurred a horse headlong down the street. A gun thudded twice, and there was the noise of the horse and rider piling up in a crashing spill. Sundown half turned, but the four men on the bed were watching him. He took the money that Pitt gave him and stuffed it into a hip pocket. It was a miracle move, the way his hand reappeared with a cocked gun.

He grinned coldly at Pitt and the trigger quartette, covering them, holding them motionless under his menacing muzzle. "Sit tight, hombres! I know your game! Segundo, fill your hand—we're leaving! Just one thing I want to tell you, Pitt. The law just now grabbed my wagon! Funny, eh, Segundo?"

"Funny as hell," Juniper agreed. "But I ain't your segundo any more. I gave my word I'd side you till you sold the silver. You've sold it." He prodded Sundown in the back with his gun. "Don't turn 'round! They'd like that! I'm leavin'. I'm takin' Tally-ho an' Wade out o' this mess, if it means I bet my smoke against all your bunch! I know *your* game, too. Yeah, she'll do to take along. But you don't take her! S'long, Sundown! You're a middlin' good man, but we just don't agree on a point or two!"

He backed swiftly to the door, drew the key, and locked the door after him when he made his exit. Men were trooping up the stairs. They were stern and purposeful, and they barred his way. Their leader wore the air and appearance of a man of considerable authority, prestige, and self-assured importance. He also wore a pair of gold-handled Colts and carried a double-barrelled, sawed-off shotgun in his hands. He was loaded for war. The quiver of his spikey cowhorn mustaches proclaimed it, and Juniper didn't doubt it.

"Young man," announced the fearsome warrior, "I'm huntin' silver smugglers!" He flashed a valuable gold badge and leveled the shotgun at Juniper. "A busher apprised me of their presence in this fair town, and upon investigation I discovered a whole damn wagon-load of Mex pesos! If you have knowledge of the felons, young man, you better tell me!"

A gun roared in the room that Juniper had recently vacated. A smashed window

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clinked its shattered fragments, and other guns hammered noisily. "That, sir," said Juniper, "answers your question, I believe."

The state marshal and his recruited deputies rushed past him, full of bravery and the hope of bounty reward. Juniper descended to the lobby, in time to glimpse a horseman rocketing past. The horseman was Sundown Sibley, and after him streamed a dozen other riders in a hurry, quitting town.

Juniper found Tally and Wade on the boardwalk outside. He called harshly to them, "What the hell you waitin' for? Grab horses from the rack, an' get the hell out o' here!"

HE RODE the southbound trail on a borrowed horse. He was broke, but for once it didn't matter. There were dodger bills out with his name on them, and after what had happened there'd be more. That didn't matter, either.

"South America," he said, and spoke the thought aloud. "Argentina. Who knows me there? A new start." He considered it, and said, "Ah, damn it!"

He half wished that he could have gone dusting off with Sundown and his wild bunch. They were most likely tracking fast out of the country, before the federal officers and soldiers could get organized to round them up. Meantime, a certain crooked speculator was no doubt trying fervently to disclaim any connection with that wagon-load of silver.

As for Tally and Wade, Juniper tried not to think of them. Wade had certainly got his fill of the wild life. He just wasn't cut out for it. He'd head for home. But he was a first-rate kind of young fellow. He'd take good care of Tally.

"Him an' his chimin' watch!" Juniper muttered, and scraped up a faint grin.

He didn't grin, though, crossing the long rise south of Santa Rosa. There was the long sweep of the brown road curving down the valley, flanked by green grass and the wild purple verbena, and waiting by the empty road with a drooping horse sat Tally.

He drew up before her, stiff-faced, and his first words were, "Where's Wade?"

"He's started home. I told him to go." She kept her eyes veiled, lowered, as if guarding them from the bright sun.

He thought that over, frowning. "I better see you home, then."

She nodded. "I have this package you gave me. It's a lot of money for a girl to carry."

"You'll need it," he told her. "Freight line needs a new station and headquarters house."

"Needs a man boss, most," she said, fingering the package. "We could—could—" her lowered face was flushed—"be partners."

He flinched, and his frown deepened. "You don't mean that, an' I can't take you up on it. You must know why."

She nodded again. "Yes, I know. But if you stayed on the H-L you'd be pretty safe. And there's so much to be done—well, you'd be so busy you'd just have to settle down! After a while they'd forget, wouldn't they?"

He caught his breath. It was a chance. If he could drop out of sight for a year or two . . .

He reached down and helped her to her feet, and they smiled at each other like a pair of conspirators. "Let's get along home partner! Maybe in a few months we could chance a trip down to Fort Sumner, an'—uh—an'—hmm?"

"There's a tiny church in Puerto de Luna," she mentioned.

"Yeah?" He lifted her into her saddle. "That's only a couple miles west off the road ahead, isn't it?"

"Yes," she murmured, somewhat breathlessly. "It's just off the road home."

THE END

TO HELL WITH RANGER LAW!

By WILLIAM R. COX

The Killer Kid's eyes glowed. "I don't cotton to your trailin' us, Red," he said. "We mind our own affairs hereabouts."

Texas Ranger Red Faytelle threw the rule books away when he crossed the Border. For Red had the mission of bringing back — alive — the man he'd crawl through fire and lead and flaming red hell — to die for!

RED FAYTELLE rode over the Border on a moth-eaten cayuse, his rough range clothing containing not one piece of identification. Red Faytelle was on an errand strictly illegal.

He was a slim man, with auburn hair and dark skin. He was out of New Orleans, raised in Texas. He was mild of

manner, deferential to the point of meekness. He was also a member of the toughest company in the Rangers.

He made camp at nightfall, several miles below Ciudad Juarez. There was a tiny village known as Moja, but he did not want to ride in after dark. Gringo outlaws were not uncommon in Moja, and there was always a chance that someone would recognize him. He had no intention of offering himself as night target to such as the Killer Kid.

He was asleep when the four riders on shoeless horses came into his camp. When a hand was placed on him he came leaping erect, a six-shooter in each fist, barking, *"Quein es? No se mueva!"*

"Do not shoot, señor. We are amigos!"

Red said, "Kick up that fire. Hold right still, you!"

Flame leaped up. The man who stood apart from the other three was smiling as though pleased. The trio were vaqueros, hard-faced, blank-eyed small men. This man was dressed in velveteen jacket, bright sash, long, slashed, bell-bottomed trousers, fine boots. His saddle was inlaid with silver, and the bit in the mouth of his fine black stallion was of the same metal.

"Señor Antonia de Chavez, at your service, señor," said the man in excellent English. "And you are Adobe Ridgewell, I take it?"

Red Faytelle said, "Señor Chavez, eh? Well . . ." He holstered his guns in the belt which lay across his saddle. "Draw up a chair."

CHAVEZ came close to the fire, hunkering down. He was as handsome as his stallion. He did not, Red thought, look unlike a thoroughbred horse. A little too narrow between the eyes, but full-lipped, long-chinned, and possessed of a Spanish aquiline nose. "We have been watching you all day. You are cautious, Señor Ridgewell. You go to Moja, perhaps?"

"Mebbe yes. Mebbe no." The three riders had withdrawn from earshot. Red poked the fire with a stick.

"You are very quick with the guns, señor," said Chavez admiringly.

"Handy thing, these days," grunted Red. This rich man, owner of thousands of cattle, was on a strange errand, riding abotu at night looking for a gun-slinger like Adobe Ridgewell. Red wondered where Adobe was these days. He would have liked to get his hands on that rascal.

Chavez said, "Admirable, indeed . . . in Moja."

"Tough town?" said Red mildly.

Chavez laughed musically. "And containing tonight the most dangerous scorpion in North America!"

"You don't say!"

Chavez leaned forward. The light fell full upon him. He said, "Señor, the gringo outlaws—excuse the expression please—some of them are men who do not appreciate the shelter we give them across the Rio. They steal, they plunder . . . they terrorize our women." His face went taut and hard. "With their big guns they bully and even kill our men. Certain ones, that is . . . such as the Killer Kid."

"Who's he?" Red kept his face in the shadows.

"The worst villain who ever crossed the Border," said Chavez. "He is ruling Moja now. He is twenty-two years old and has killed twenty-five men. He is a chaser of women. He is a thief."

"You don't like him," drawled Red.

"I want him killed!" Chavez threw the words across the fire. "He is annoying my girl of the village, a girl whose father worked for me. He has stolen my cattle, killed one of my men. He has—"

"Why don't y'all just git him?"

"Because he will kill several of us first," said Chavez. "He shoots on sight. He is faster than an adder, surer than death. The only way he can be finished is by—another gunman."

Red said, "You ain't tryin' to hire me to shoot him?"

"I know your reputation, señor," said Chavez politely. "I am telling you that for the good of every gringo seeking a haven in Mexico this creature should be exterminated. I am offering you one thousand pesos if you accomplish this act. If you fail, I will bury and keep hiring men until Killer Brent is exterminated!"

"Until that—or he gits you," said Red.

"Si, señor," said Chavez coldly. "One or the other."

The man was not afraid, Red perceived. For himself he had no dread of Kid Brent. It was strange that a man unafraid, a man with many vaqueros at his call, should hire a gun to do away with the Killer Kid. But the Mexicans were devious people, Red well knew. There were always wheels within wheels. There was politics, there was angles.

He said, "I'll take a look-see in Moja, señor."

"You'll take the assignment?"

"If he's causin' trouble like you say—mebbe," said Red.

Chavez arose in one smooth motion. He said, "When he is dead, come to my ranchero . . ."

"When he's dead, you come to town," grinned Red. "I'll take your pay . . . and move on. Killer Kid's prob'ly got some friends around. And I got a date in El Paso come next week."

Chavez bowed. "As you say." He swung upon the black horse. He looked down at Red and frowned. "You know him? He likes to kill from the saddle. He rides down his victims as he shoots them. He is completely ruthless, Señor Ridgeway."

"I'll look him up," said Red. "Adios, señor." He listened to the hoofs going away in the night. He banked his fire. He lay back in his blanket, placing the gunbelt close to his hand.

He was glad Antonio de Chavez had visited him. He was sure of Kid Brent's whereabouts now.

He wondered what Adobe would have done in his place, and he chuckled even as he fell asleep.

MOJA was so small it contained only one cantina. This place was a low, rambling building with two els and a semi-patio in which hogs rooted. There was no fair vista in Moja—only adobe huts and big-eyed children running underfoot with the dogs and their parents, afraid of the Americanos who loafed in the cantina or fought in the plaza, clinging to the ragged edge of existence by various means, none attractive.

One house, small, battered, looked neat and clean. There was a tiny garden, some flowers, a curtain at each window. A girl knelt in the yard, a small girl with black hair. Her eyes were large and soft brown, looking askance at Red Faytelle.

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He did not pause. He swung his hat off, bowing, smiling. He walked across the plaza to the saloon. It was morning and his horse was corraled at the edge of the village where a peso had brought him the adulation and fawning thanks of an old man called Pedro. He was at the door of the place before he remembered the words of Chavez, "He is annoying a girl of the village. . . ." There had been emphasis upon that portion of the man's tirade against Kid Brent. Red paused and looked back.

The girl was standing. A man had appeared, as though from a magician's hat. He was a slight man, scarcely more than a youth. His profile presented itself to Red, cleanly cut as a cameo, hawk-nose sharp and straight, chin firm. It was a good-looking face, seen at that distance, adorned by a smile.

The girl was smiling, too. Her eyes were bright, her expression eager. The two heads were not far apart, and they were not unfriendly.

This, then, thought Red Faytelle, cannot be the girl Chavez was so hot about. This girl welcomed the attention of Kid Brent.

Red went into the barroom. There was a long, low counter, some tables scattered about the main room. What was in the els Red could not see. They went off backwards from the central portion of the building, and there were no windows in the rear. The place was full of tobacco smoke and smelled of stale beer and mescal. There were four Americans and several Mexicans already at their daily routine of cards and liquor.

Among Red's other sterling qualities was a strength of stomach which could brook liquid or food of almost any quality. He ordered whiskey and even drank some of the stuff the evil-looking barkeep produced. He leaned against the bar—it was too low for his elbows—and surveyed the dismal scene.

There was no one he knew in the place. The quartet was young, reckless looking; cowboys gone bad, he thought. None was a seasoned badman. They stared at him uneasily, fumbling with their cards. They kept casting anxious glances at the door.

They had not long to wait. The portal banged open. Kid Brent came in, still smiling. He wore clean, well-pressed range clothing and a gay Mexican rebosa. He minced on high-heeled riding boots, hand-stitched, coming straight to where Red stood.

He was a nice-looking youngster with two guns strapped low on his thighs. But deep in his eyes was the hunted, careful look of a man who stands outside the law. On the surface he was a friendly grinning youth. Underneath the killer lurked. Red had seen it before in the kid killers of the frontier. It was a strange thing, born of a land where men wore guns, and perforce must use them.

One mistake, Red thought, one wild moment, and they were undone, these wild youths. There had been a time, not long before, when it could have happened to him. Liquor, a girl, a rival, a wild word or two. But Red had hauled himself out of a saloon and into the Rangers. He might just have easily gone across the Border and become one with Brent, the Killer Kid.

Brent's hand clapped his shoulder. "Drink up and have a smile with me, stranger."

"Why, sure," drawled Red.

"What do we call you, stranger?" asked the Kid carefully. "Ain't many Americans here, y' know. Got to have handles."

"Red," he said. "Just call me Red."

"Good enough," said the other heartily. He did not drink his liquor. He held it in his hand, but made no effort to raise it. "I'm the Kid. These here hombres are Pelky, Tobasco, Corky and Jimmy."

The four at the table nodded, their vigilance not relaxed. Red said, "Howdy.

And now have a round on me." He put a gold piece on the bar. The barkeep stared at it, and the Kid's eyes brightened.

"You musta struck it rich before you come over."

Red said, "Not too rich. I was in a hurry."

The Kid laughed. "Know what yuh mean, Red. I been hustlin' over that river for some time, comin' and goin'. Got so I don't know which is comin' and which is goin'!"

THE FOUR at the table joined in the laughter. They were evidently satisfied now—too easily satisfied, Red thought. They were not a very bright or very tough band. Only the Killer Kid was redoubtable. It was as had been reported; the older criminals shied away from Brent. He was too gun-crazy, too little interested in huge profits. Only the kids, the hot heads in trouble, would stick around with him.

"I won't be here long," said Red. "Nice t' see good comp'ny for my vacation."

"Oughta pull out, myself." The Kid suddenly scowled and buttoned his lips tight. His jaw was rather prominent when he was not smiling. His eyes narrowed. He was thinking of the girl, Red knew, and he was thinking of something else. He lifted the glass and drained the fiery liquor at a gulp.

That was another sign Red recognized. These boys got edgy. They would not drink unless they knew—or thought they knew—their company. And when they did drink, they poured it down without tasting it. They were always in a hurry.

He said, "Have another shot. That piece is for likker. I been two weeks from sight of a drink."

"No, thanks," said Kid Brent. "I don't take none, 'cept sociable-like. 'Tain't smart, Red."

"Suit yourself," shrugged Red. "Ain't much of a booze-fighter myself." So the Kid could not be taken drunk across the Border. It would have to be some other way.

Kid Brent said, "Time to ride, boys." The four men put aside their cards. They rose in a band and filed out of the place. Kid Brent nodded to Red and said, "See yuh later, friend. Won't be gone long. Enjoy the town."

He chuckled, going out. He led his men out of sight across the cluttered plaza. Red watched them through the door. The Kid was two steps ahead of the others, his rolling gait hurried, but he took time to pause and speak with the smiling, pretty girl in the garden. Then Red was alone with the barkeep.

That villainous-seeming gentleman had a scar that bespoke a lost knife fight. He stared at Red and said, "You not bother that girl, no?"

"No," said Red. "Gals ain't my dish. Who is she?"

"Maria. My daughter."

"Your wife must have been *muy hermosa,*" said Red.

"Gracias, señor," said the barkeep. "She is the affianced of Señor Keed. So . . . you see."

"You are acquainted with Señor de Chavez?" asked Red in Spanish.

The barkeep's face flattened into dangerous planes. "You are his friend, perhaps?"

Red shook his head. "Just heard of him."

"Cochino," spat the bartender. "A reech peeg!"

"He possibly gives trouble with the lovely lady?"

"I fight heem! Keed, he will keel him! Even now . . ." The man fell silent, glancing at Red from under lowered lids and scowling brows. "You understand, there is no honor in this Chavez. He fancies himself king of this country. He demands, he does not ask. If he did not have so many vaqueros . . ."

"Now that's plumb interestin'," murmured Red. He remembered the obviously tender passage between Brent and the girl. He remembered the narrow, predatory, handsome face of the rich rancher. He knew enough about Mexican barkeepers to realize that a union between the daughter and a wealthy rancher would seem heavenly under any decent circumstances—and some not too legal, perhaps. It was easy enough to add up the score.

"I warn you, señor, watch out for Chavez. He is treacherous as a snake. He is full of smooth words and bad deeds."

"Thank you," said Red. "Keep the gold piece, do not try to make change now. When my compatriots return, buy them a drink." He smiled and strolled out of the barroom. He walked down to the corral where old Pedro, a monkey-wrinkled, brown little man, assured him there was a room in his house at Red's disposal. He would put out his wife's uncle, a non-paying guest. Red countered that he would sleep in the barn with his horse, to be near the animal, which was sensitive and needed company.

Then he saddled up and rode out of town.

AT NIGHTFALL Red Faytelle was weary. He had done a heap of riding over unfamiliar territory. He had seen much of the country.

From a distance, through glasses, he had seen men. He had seen a small bunch of cattle, cut out and swung northward. He had heard shots and a horse belonging to Chavez had run riderless back toward the ranchero.

When he came into the bar, washed and shaven and clean, he saw that Jimmy and Corky were missing. Only Pelky and Tobasco were at the establishment with Kid Brent.

The Killer Kid was not smiling. He faced Red, back to the bar. His two young gunmen flanked him. Brent said, "Red, I cut track today. Shod hoss. Looked like someone was trailin' us."

"I was out for a ride," said Red easily.

"I don't cotton to thet," said Brent. His voice was low and its tone level. The light in his eyes was glowing. "We mind our own affairs hereabouts.

Red said pleasantly, "Then mind 'em. I ain't bothered you, have I?"

A hush fell. The two young gunslingers stepped away, staring, their hands nervous at their belts. Red stood hip-shot, a medium-sized slender man whose guns rested on his thighs in the same manner as did the Kid's.

Kid Brent bit his lip. For a moment, Red knew, anything might happen. The killer was close to the surface then.

The barkeep said in the background, "Señor Red, he leave money for you to drink. And—remember the message!"

Brent whirled, hammering the bar with his fist. "Damn your messages! Maria and I will be married next week. The hell with Chavez!"

Red drawled, "You stole his gal, then his cattle. He's got twenty men. You think he won't try somethin'?"

Brent spat, "What do you know? Who the hell are you?"

"I'm another gringo. Hate to see yuh in a jackpot," Red said.

The barkeep said eagerly, "You see? He is a friend!"

"I don't want no more friends. I'll fight alone. I'll kill him, sure as shootin'!"

"And get killed yourself by his men?" The barkeep looked sad. "Will that help Maria?"

"I've got to have money for a trip. She wants a trip for her wedding." The Kid was out of control now, talking too much. Red sensed it. The others scowled.

Red said, "The money from those cattle oughta do it. All yuh got to do now is stand him off till the boys get back."

Kid Brent said, "I don't believe he'll attack the town. Your spy is crazy. . . ."

The barkeep said, "He will be in tonight. With his riders."

"He'll be after Maria," muttered Brent. "I'll have to get her away. Only there's no safe place for her around here, and I can't take her across the Border right now. Not for a while."

Red said, "I could take her over for you."

The Kid stared at him. "What? That's loco for sure. You?"

Red said, "Chavez sure will come in. She might get killed."

"He don't dare come in. He knows I'll get him."

"He could send in his crew, stay back himself."

The Kid said, "I wouldn't trust her with another man."

"You don't mean that," said Red. "You must trust her if you're going to marry her."

The Kid kept his eyes fixed on Red for a long time. Then he said, "I reckon I would, if I had to. I don't know yuh, Red, but damned if I don't believe Maria'd be safe with yuh."

"Leave it like this," said Red casually. "Let her get ready. If Chavez comes in, have a hoss for her in Pedro's corral. I'll be saddled up. I'll have her in El Paso, safe with a woman I know, in a few hours. I'll give you the woman's name right now. When it's safe you can either come over, or she can come home. If you get Chavez, come and overtake us and we'll return. How's that?"

It was full of holes, he knew. But Kid Brent was young, and he was in love. He was with only two supporters against a small army of hard-riding Mex vaqueros. He was a refugee and could not flee the country.

If he got the girl over the Border, Red knew, it would be a cinch to get the Kid eventually. He had no desire to bring the Kid home horizontally. He much preferred a quiet arrest. Killing people was not his business. Bringing them to justice in the courts was all that was asked of him.

The Kid said, "It'll have to do, Red. Come on over and meet her. And . . . we'll have to tell last names. . . . . I'm Kid Brent." He seemed to hold his breath, awaiting Red's reaction.

"Had some people named Brent, friends o' mine back in Lou'sianny," said Red. "My name's Morrison. Red Morrison."

THEY walked across the street. The girl was waiting in the doorway of the house. Her round, brown face was very pretty. She was plump and would be quite fat in a few years, Red thought, but now she was possessed of a wild grace, a half-veiled quality of passion. He bowed to her.

The Kid made plans hastily. It was quite dark. The lamp in the house threw a weak light across the three of them. The

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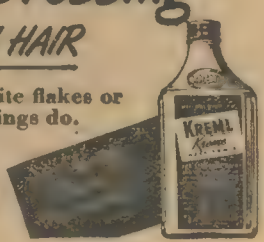


girl was quietly acquiescent. She glanced once at Red, dimpled, then gave her full attention to Kid Brent. When he had finished she said, *"Si, si, angel mio."* She went inside, and Red knew she was packing.

Kid Brent wiped perspiration from his brow. He said, "I dunno. Mebbe I'm wrong. She's sweet and good. Mebbe I got no right to her. But better me than that swine Chavez. . . . You take care of her, Red. By God, if you don't—"

"You could send her with one of your boys," said Red.

"You think I'd trust them?" The Kid was scornful. "Why, I don't even know if them two'll be back with the beef money. They'll fight because they have to fight. But otherwise—bah!"

Red said, "You'll fight the whole Chavez crew?"

"I'll fight 'em my way," said Kid Brent. "I got to get ready right now. You wait here. I'll be back." He tottered off. His heels were too high, thought Red. Get him off a horse and he would be in trouble. . . .

Pelkey and Tobasco crossed the plaza. The lamps in the bar flickered. The girl came to the door, smiled shyly at Red. Horses pounded around the corner and slid to a stop.

The three youths had rifles in the boots. Across each pommel was slung a shotgun. Besides their twin Colts, each had a smaller revolver stuck into his belt. The Kid called, "Got yer hosses ready at Pedro's. . . . When they ride in, y'all ride out, fast!"

Red waved his arm. The girl had a small pack. He took it from her and walked down the southern side of the plaza at her side. She had no words for him. She seemed fearless and contained.

The Kid and his two men had disappeared. Red could figure their plan of action. Riding arsenals, they would wait for Chavez and then charge. The Kid was magnificent in the saddle. That was his fighting spot, the hurricane deck of a cayuse. . . . Yes, it was easy to figure.

No matter who won, Red had his mission in hand. He had been unofficially sent in to bring back Kid Brent to the United States and justice. Either way, the Kid was finished. If Chavez got him, that would end it all. If he lived, he would be after the girl and they would get him in El Paso later . . . .

Yet Red Faytelle was uneasy. He found the old man waiting with the horses. The girl was thoroughly trustful and ready to go. Pedro whispered that his cousin worked on the Chavez ranch, that they were indeed riding tonight.

The girl mounted. Red swung up on the deceptively weary-looking buckskin he had chosen for the trip. They started north, to a strategic high spot he had selected earlier for a vantage point in case of trouble.

He paused there. The girl sighed. Timidly, she said, "Señor, you think Chavez will hurt them?"

Red said, "I wouldn't know, señorita."

"Oh, he is so very good," she said in Spanish. "The Kid, he is kind and gentle. Chavez—he is brutal and cruel."

"I know what yuh mean," said Red. Uncomfortably, he did. He reined in on the high spot at the edge of the village. It was too dark to see plainly, but he could guess everything from the sound.

He could hear the horses coming in from the west. He knew that would be the main body of Chavez's vaqueros. They rode hard and fast. They meant to give little warning. They were hard-bitten, tough, good little fighters. Red knew them of old.

His experienced ears estimated that there were a dozen of them. Only a dozen, charging the town. Then there would be others, coming in from different directions.

He sat his horse uneasily. He glanced

at the girl. In the darkness he could only see that her head was low, as though mourning. He knew the stolid fatalism of these people.

He cursed silently. He should take the girl and depart at once. He had scored a coup. His captain would recommend him for promotion after this stunt.

He remembered the narrow face of the rancher, eager over the campfire. Chavez would be counting upon Red tonight to step in and kill the Kid. That was part of his scheme, of course. That, and the girl.

It was his bounden duty to take the girl northward. She would go right now, believing in him, because the Kid had put her in his charge. The Kid, desperate, too smart to trust his own cohorts, had recognized in Red a man who could perform.

Now Red Faytelle sat his horse and cursed his own indecision.

And then he recognized that it was indecision. His mind became very clear. He saw the bar where he had almost begun his own career of killing. He saw the hate-ridden face of the man who had challenged him.

He remembered hitting the man with his fist. He remembered going straight from the bar to the Ranger Captain in town . . . . He had been lucky, that was all. Lucky to be sober enough and to have something in him that drove him to the side of the law.

He said to Maria, "Will you wait here?"

Her head came up. She reined the horse close to him. "You will go down? You will go to him? What are you—an angel from heaven?"

He could estimate her beauty even in the darkness. They had it early and lost it soon, but they had it, these women. He said, "I'm just another gringo. You wait here."

She said, "No, I will go down, too."

"No! The Kid will not like that," he said swiftly. "But you may go to Pedro's. Hide there. If we do not come, ride to El Paso, to the home of Mrs John Faytelle. Can you remember that?"

She said, "Si, señor. I can remember. I am not afraid."

THEY rode down off the hill. He could visualize most of it. A knot of riders at the house, to snatch the girl. A siege of the barroom, where they would expect to find the three gringos. A search of the town by the groups coming in from other angles than the westward way.

He did not have to spur the willing buckskin. His rifle was oiled and ready in the boot. He rode down into the backyard of the barroom, and the animal picked its way delicately among the debris. He held one revolver in his hand. His jaw was set, his eyes burned a little. He was doing that which he should not do, he knew. But his heart was pounding gaily, as always at the nearness of danger.

He saw at once that the danger was acute. He heard the first shots when the Kid and two boys rode recklessly into the main section of the plaza. Kid Brent was too gun-crazy, too foolishly brave. They rode into a group of squat riders who were gathered at the house of Maria.

Chavez was not there. Red looked for him, but the sleek owner of the ranchero was hidden from view. He saw Pelkey go down as guns blazed.

Then Kid Brent was riding. His horse obeyed him by instinct, it seemed. Buckaroos fell right and left. Standing in the stirrups like a young avenging god, the Kid rode into them. He blasted with the shotgun. He unlimbered both revolvers and men fell like apples from a tree. He turned and rode them down again in the dim light from the moon and the stars which rode a dark blue heaven.

Then came the group which had lain back for just this chance. But the Kid was gone, with Tobasco, around the edge of

the buildings that lined the plaza. Four riders dismounted before the bar. They held guns in their hands. From within came a rifle shot, and one fell. But they were very brave—they ran for the bar.

The Kid could not help. Red was riding through the alley. He lifted a gun. Coming into view, he cried, "Git! Ride out! Go home!"

They shot at him. He lifted his gun, aiming low. He shot a man through the leg, dropped another one near the barroom door. Again the shot came from inside. The little vaqueros could not stand it. They broke for their horses. They rode out.

There was no sign of the Kid, no sign of Chavez. Red stood, reloading his revolver, thinking hard. There was something missing. In a moment he knew what it was. Not enough of the Chavez crowd was in town. He whirled back into the alley.

He rode like the wind, back toward Pedro's. On the far side of the corral he dismounted, letting the horse run inside. He came around the edge of the fence, running swiftly, spotting the strange horses, knowing he had reasoned correctly.

The Kid was there. Tobasco was missing, but the Kid stood against the wall of old Pedro's house, his legs bowed, unable to run or even move properly in the high-heeled boots. Two men faced him, spaced for fight. One was Chavez, sneering in the light of the lamp in Pedro's house. The other was Adobe Ridgewell, gunman for hire, veteran of a hundred border escapades, tough, mean, murderous.

Chavez was saying, "So . . . you come to the end, Killer Kid! Your red-haired friend deceived me, but not for long. I have been watching, with his aid. My little Maria is inside the house, eh?"

The Kid said, "Stay where you are, both of you." His guns rode in their holsters. His young face was tense, his chin up. His eyes were clear now, Red saw. There was no fear in him.

"Come, come, you may go free," said Chavez. "Just mount your horse and go. I only want the girl."

Adobe Ridgewell growled, "Yeah . . . I'd ruther side yuh than shoot yuh, Kid. We could pull many a job, you an' me."

"You can't have her," said the Kid.

"Then we shall have to take her!" Chavez laughed. He made a signal to Ridgewell and leaped suddenly aside, reaching for a gun in his sash.

Red said sharply, "Here, Chavez!" He stepped into view.

The rancher whirled, eyes blazing. His gun came up. Adobe Ridgewell went for his pistol. The Kid stood against the wall and made his play. Even then Red knew there were men hidden behind them.

Shots rang out as in a small battle—too many shots. Red drew and thumbed the Colts. Chavez spun and threw out his arms.

The Kid was against the wall. He propped himself, working his gun. Adobe Ridgewell seemed to throw his weapon away, stumbling, groping with clawed hands. Then he fell.

Red found dim figures in the background. He emptied both guns. There was a moment's cessation. From within the house came rifle shots. Pedro, bless him, and the girl, Red thought. Again silence fell.

Red called in Spanish, "Your master is downed! Go home, or you will all be killed!"

There was no response. There was no further firing. Red went forward, gun in hand. The Kid had sagged a little, but he was conscious.

"Hombres behind the barn," he said. "'Dobe never let off his gun!"

"You got him clean," Red said. The Kid was hit in the body. It looked fairly high up.

The Kid said, "Got to take care of Maria." His head sagged.

The girl came flying from the house. Red turned to the barn. Horses were departing. Chavez moved once. Maybe he wasn't killed, Red hoped. He saw old Pedro with an ancient musket in his hands, and called the old man.

IN TEN MINUTES they had a buggy hooked up. Marie was binding the Kid's wound. Red picked up the slight body, amazed at its lack of weight. They made a bed of blankets and placed Kid Brent upon it.

Red said, "Pedro . . . take care of Chavez. Send for priest and doctor. You do not know of us, where we went, *sabe?*" He passed over money, and the old man's eyes shone.

The carriage was old, but Red knew the smoothest way. Maria sat crooning, holding her lover's head in her arms. They drove off into the Mexican night . . . .

At Ciudad Juarez, they paused. Red had only to skirt the town and quietly ford the Rio at a spot he knew, and his prisoner would be delivered. He looked down at the prone boy. The Kid was awake, his jaw set, lips biting back cries of pain.

Red said, "Juarez."

"You got me out, pardner." It was a whisper.

"Yeah," said Red. He swallowed hard. He said, "Kid . . . I'm Red Faytelle."

"Figgered yuh might be a Ranger," nodded the Kid. "Waal, anyways, yuh got Maria out. She's safe now."

Red said, "Look here, Kid. Yuh got Adobe Ridgewell. We wanted him worse'n we wanted you. Now, supposin' I report that I got Adobe. That you was in a fight with him and got shot, but got away. . . . There's a good doc and a priest in Juarez, and they won't look for yuh in this close."

Kid Brent said, "Yuh'd do that? Why, Red?"

"Because it might jest as well been me as you," said Red. He got down and went to the back of the buggy where his buckskin was tied. He loosed the rope. He got aboard the cayuse.

Maria was gathering up the reins. She had understood only that Red was leaving them. She smiled at him, kissing her hand repeatedly.

Red said, "And don't stick your nose over the Border again, Kid. Because if you do, it'll be my bounden duty to get you."

The Kid said weakly, "Red . . . I'll go south and ranch . . . if I live. I swear it. With Maria. Yuh'll never regret this, Red. Yuh'll hear from me. . . ."

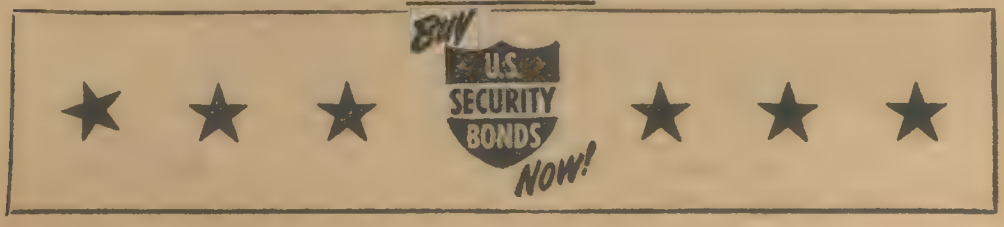
Red rode fast for the river. He was doing wrong, he supposed.

But on the other hand, he had set free a boy—a brave boy. Who knew how many of his killings had been forced on the Kid? Not Red.

And furthermore, he reasoned, his errand had been illegal. What right, he asked himself virtuously, did a Texas Ranger have to make arrests in Mexico? None!

A little echo said, "What right did a Ranger have to shoot a rancher named Chavez?"

Red refused to answer. He was crossing the Rio to make his report.



Langley said, "Dead men can't talk. Is that the idea, Grady?"

Dynamic Novelette of Sixgun Elections

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

CHAPTER ONE

Hardcase Trouble

THEY strung a big red-and-white "John Langley for Governor" banner across Denton's main street, and the first time he saw it, John Langley scowled. The second time, he merely frowned. Later on, he glanced up at it with a sheepish smile. In one month they'd won him over from a reluctant candidate to a battling crusader, from a retiring rancher to a champion of the people.

The banner wasn't so gaudy now, after three months of sun and rain and wind. It was limp and faded, torn in one place—bedraggled looking. But John Langley's campaign went on apace, booming astonishingly, and a two-weeks' swing about the state—making speeches, gaining voters' support—convinced him that he need not fear election day.

But what surprised him even more was the discovery that he really wanted to be Governor, that he was able to put his heart into the game. The fight put by

When Blood Bought the Ballots!

It would take blood and bullets to win that election, Rancher John Langley knew, and that was all right with him . . . as long as he followed the trail straight up to the Governor's mansion—where he must save one bullet for the hide of that double-dealing, murder-hiring politico, Big Tim Grady!

his opponent—or rather, by the political machine backing his opponent—had decided him. It was a dirty fight, a net of lies, but John Langley, a cowman since early frontier days, had never backed down from any sort of fight.

The train bearing him home rattled on through the rainy night after leaving Slade's Junction, the last stop before Denton, and Langley was comfortable in his seat with an unlighted cigar clenched between his teeth. The coach was only half full, and three of the passengers had come aboard at the Junction stop. They were three hardcases, and they'd brought a bottle along which, since they kept pulling on it, was rapidly becoming empty. They argued in whiskey-thickened voices, argued politics, and the youngest of the trio was noisiest of all. "I'm telling you," he finally yelled, "that John Langley's not worth the powder to blow him to hell!"

He lurched out of his seat, faced the rest of the passengers. He was in his early twenties, a half-handsome youth with reckless brown eyes and a shock of unruly black hair showing from under his pushed-back Stetson. He put his hand to his gun, thrust out a belligerent chin.

"Anybody want to call me on that?"

Nobody answered. One of his companions said, "Take it easy, Bert."

The cocky Bert swore and came along the aisle, glaring at each male passenger and saying, "What about you, mister? You claim that Langley's worth more than the powder it'd take to blow him to hell?"

EACH reply was a denial, for nobody wanted trouble with this young tough. John Langley was beginning to feel a murky suspicion. Bert kept shooting glances his way, taking his measure, even while he badgered the other men. The youth's companions, though keeping their seat, also glanced Langley's way. He remembered them then; they'd been in the crowd when he made a speech last night at Dobeville, and they'd heckled him quite a bit. His suspicion took full form. This was a put-up job. The trio had been sent by his political enemies to heckle him some more—and maybe, he thought, bait him into something that could be used as ammunition against him. Uneasiness gripped him, not because he feared such men, but because it would be simple for a man in his new position to make a blunder.

"You, mister!" Bert skipped a couple passengers to face Langley. "What do you say about it?" He wasn't as drunk as he pretended. There was a calculating look in his brown eyes. "I heard that this Langley hombre who's running for Governor makes speeches that a girl school teacher down at Denton writes for him. He lets a woman put words in his mouth. You figure a man like that's worth voting for?"

"I wouldn't vote for him, son."

"What?" the young hardcase said stupidly, taken aback.

Langley no longer doubted that he and his companions knew him and had boarded the train for the express purpose of baiting him. A thin smile touched his lips, and if Bert had known him well, he would have taken warning from that mirthless smile. It was a danger signal.

"So you wouldn't vote for him, eh?" Bert muttered. "Why not?"

"It'd be too much like patting myself on the back, sonny," Langley replied. "So I'll refrain from voting this election."

He plucked the cigar from his mouth, reared to his feet, stepped out into the aisle. Bert reeled back a couple steps. Startled but trying to screw up his courage again. He was like a schoolboy reciting a piece he'd been forced to memorize, and having a bad time of it.

"So you're John Langley himself, are you?" he said, with forced heartiness—

and simulated contempt. He spat at Langley's boots. "A straight-shooting, two-gun cattleman for Governor! That sure makes me laugh!" He managed a guffaw. "You look more like a two-bit rancher they found in the sticks and rigged up real fancy," he went on. His two partners were on their feet now, and he glanced around to make sure they were backing him up. "Let's see what kind of a two-gun hombre you are, Mister Governor! Let's show the folks if you've got the guts to draw on Bertie Vance!"

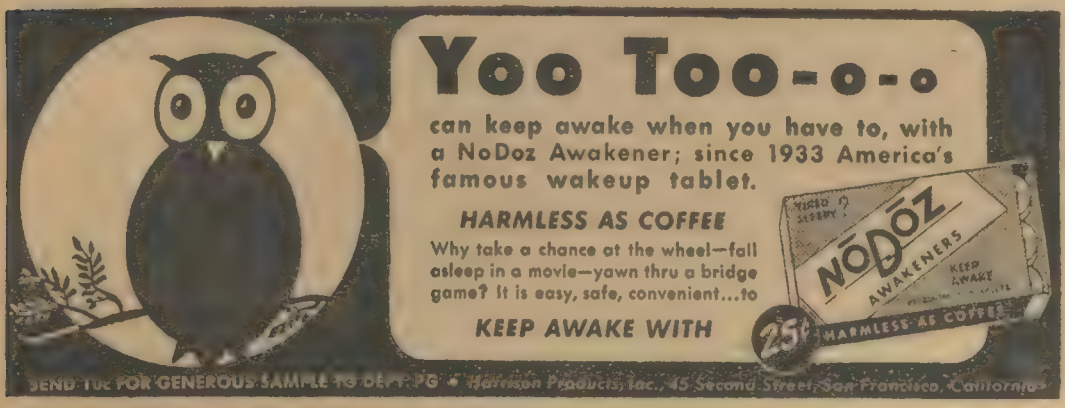
Langley's astonishment was real enough. It was a ranker-smelling bait than he had expected. They'd been sent to trick him into a gunfight, so that there would be real ammunition with which to snipe at him. Anger gripped him, but he knew better than to make the mistake of reaching under his coat for his gun, even though he was sure that he could draw faster and shoot straighter than this young self-styled badman. He lunged forward, struck at the man's face with his right hand and grabbed for his gun with his left.

Bertie Vance staggered backwards, collided with his partners. He cursed bitterly and grabbed at his empty holster. A look of amazement and fear spread over his face when he realized that the gun in Langley's hand was his own.

"Sonny, you and your friends better find another coach," Langley said. "You've smelled up this one badly enough."

Laughter burst from the no longer cowed passengers. The three hardcases scowled, muttered oaths, but turned and moved sheepishly to the coach ahead. Langley tossed the gun onto an empty seat, returned to his own. He took out a fresh cigar, lighted it up, closed his mind to the chattering voices about him. He lost himself in thought, wondering whether it was possible that this had been a plot to involve him in a shooting scrape, an attempt to kill him, or a try at showing him up as a coward. The minds of the political machine worked in devious ways, without a doubt, but he began to doubt that murder had been plotted. It had been less than that, and no longer mattered—except as additional proof that he could expect almost anything to happen between now and election day.

He smarted under one thing that Bertie had said, however. It was true that his speeches were written for him. He had no talent for putting his thoughts into words that would sway great numbers of people, and so Martha Trevor had helped him out. But she was more than a school teacher; she was his financee, the woman he was to marry, the future mistress of Governor's House at the state capital, the most important of the people he would see tonight when the train pulled into Denton City.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THE CONDUCTOR came through bawling, "Denton! Next stop, Denton City!" John Langley rose, took his valise down from the luggage rack, drifted toward the coach platform with half a dozen other passengers. He was taller than most of the others by half a head, over six feet tall, but lean of face and body. He was not a handsome man in the ordinary sense of the word; but women—especially Martha—saw a rugged good looks in his angular face. At forty-two he was gray at the temples. But at forty-two, he felt younger than on his last birthday. The change from rancher to candidate—he refused to call himself a politician—had been like starting a new life. It had given him a new zest for living. It had made him feel not too old to consider courting Martha.

Her saying yes after a mere month of courtship had surprised Langley far more than his success in campaigning. Now, with the train coming to a jolting stop, Martha alone filled his thoughts. Despite the downpour, she'd be at the station to meet him.

She was not.

The other arriving passengers hurried away, the departing travelers boarded the train. The stationmaster exchanged pouches with the mail clerk. The conductor looked at his watch, used his lantern to highball the engineer. The bell clanged, steam hissed, and the train got under way again. John Langley stood alone on the platform. He'd counted on Martha, expected at least a couple of the men who had talked him into running for office. Finally he chuckled over the thought that a man was never as important as he would like to have himself believe.

He buttoned his coat, turned up the collar, stepped from the awninged platform into the rain. A rider jogged along Main Street, his slicker glistening. It was Charlie Owens, a rancher and one of Langley's backers. He swung over to Langley.

"Come up to headquarters right away, John," Owens said flatly. "It's important."

He turned back at once, not waiting for a reply.

Langley halted, stared after him, resentment in him.

When he started out again, he headed toward the house where Martha lived—not toward the party's headquarters. John Langley took orders from no man.

AS IN most parts of the cattle country, young ladies came to teach school in Denton and ended up the term by getting married. Martha Trevor, however, had lasted through one school term and was now in the second. It was not because she was any less attractive than the other schoolmarms who had come to Denton City. In fact, the predominantly male population would have voted her the prettiest girl who had yet signed a contract with the school board. But she was older than those who had preceded her, being twenty-eight, and so was not swept off her feet by the great number of suitors. Until John Langley became interested in

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her, two months ago, the school board had high hopes that this time its teacher problem was solved for good and their troubles were over.

Like the others, Martha was from the East. Like the others, she had a room at the Widow Lambert's house. She came to the door when Langley knocked, saying, "Welcome home, John." He stepped into the hall, set down his bag and removed his hat. He took her in his arms, kissed her, and found her mouth cold and unresponsive. He released her and stood back.

"Something wrong, my dear?"

"We're worried here, John," she said unsteadily. "They've sent a political boss to Denton City to stir up trouble for us. It's Big Tim Grady himself."

"Grady? Oh, I can handle him."

"You don't understand, John. He's out to smash you."

"That'll take some doing."

Martha shook her head, showing that she did not agree with him. She was a tall, dark-haired girl who was always slow to smile. She was very grave at the moment. "Come into the parlor," she said. "I'll tell you about it."

"I'd like to," Langley told her, "but I saw Charlie Owens, and he wants me over at headquarters. How will it be if I see you sometime tomorrow evening, my dear?"

She nodded, and Langley took her in his arms again. She was submissive but not responsive, and it seemed to Langley, thinking about it as he walked through the rain to the New Denton Hotel, that Martha was frightened. He couldn't understand that. She was an extremely sensible young woman, and it wasn't like her to be afraid. Unconsciously he quickened his stride.

* * *

The political party backing John Langley for Governor had set up headquarters in a big room on the second floor of the hotel. It was filled with smoke when Langley entered, and a half-dozen men sat around a long table. Charlie Owens was there. And Sam Pope and Ed Larkins, ranchers, like Langley. Sheriff Pat Meehan was there, and Banker Will Eberts. Also Clyde Warden, a merchant. Most of his supporters were absent, however, for the group, which called itself the Committee of Fifteen, was not at full strength tonight. These six appeared rather grim tonight, and Langley said matter of factly, "Looks like a wake, gentlemen."

He put down his valise, shook the rain from his coat and hat, sharply aware that his comment drew no smiles. He took out and lighted a cigar, went and stood at the head of the table, wondering what in blazes was wrong.

Aloud he said, "Let's have it. It can't be as bad as all that."

They looked at each other, silently passing the buck. Finally gray-mustached Charlie Owens said, "It's like this, John. When we picked you to run against the political machine that's been giving this state rotten government, we figured that you were the one man they couldn't smear."

"Mud can be thrown at any man, Charlie. It doesn't always stick."

"This time it does," Owens said flatly. There was a copy of the Denton City *Gazette,* the local weekly, before him. He shoved it across the table. "Read that headline, John."

It was a big headline across the top of the front page, and read: LANGLEY LINKED TO SANDROW WILD BUNCH.

Langley looked up, startled. "I thought Ben Hackett, the editor of the *Gazette,* was supporting me," he said flatly. "How come?"

"Big Tim Grady got to him somehow," Owens said. "That hurts us, sure. But

what hurts worse is the stuff he's printing. Every other newspaper in the state that's controlled by Grady and his crowd will play this up. If you read the story, you'll see how smart Grady is playing it. He's feeding it to the voters in small portions. He claims that your connection with Matt Sandrow and his crowd will be exposed when his candidate, Hobart Ames, stumps Denton City next week."

"A pack of lies," Langley said. "Nobody'll believe it."

"Plenty of people will fall for it," Banker Eberts put in. "This is cattle country, and the Sandrow crowd is a rustler outfit. If Ames makes a speech and proves that you—"

Langley's temper flared. "Damn it, you men act as though you believe it!" he roared. "You taking Grady's word against mine?"

There was a moment's sheepish silence. Then Sheriff Meehan, fat and red-faced, said, "Don't go off half-cocked, John. We're just trying to work this thing out. The Sandrow crowd works out of the Badlands, and your big JL Ranch borders that malpais. Maybe that's all Grady has on you, that you and Matt Sandrow are sort of neighbors."

Langley was still angry. "About a year ago, when that outfit started operating in these parts," he said, "I rode into the Badlands. I went alone, and it took me a week to cross Sandrow's trail. I told him then that if he ran off any of my stock, I'd bring my whole crew in there after him and his wild bunch. I told him I'd hang him."

He paused, eying Sheriff Meehan narrowly. "He's not bothered my range. It wasn't my job to round him up. That was up to you and the rest of the law officers in this state." He saw Meehan begin to squirm. "I've had no other dealings with that old thief," he went on. "I knew Matt Sandrow for a rustler and a horse thief twenty years ago, down in Texas. I never had any dealings—"

Clyde Warden, the storekeeper, jumped on that. "Maybe Grady found out about that, about you knowing Sandrow down in Texas," he said.

Langley looked at them with as much disgust as anger. "I give you my word that I've never had any dealings with any of the Sandrow crowd," he told them. "More than that I can't do. Now, gentlemen, I've had a hard trip. I've been doing work that I was never cut out for, and speech-making is mighty hard work. I'm tired and I'm going to get some rest. Good-night to you."

He turned, picked up his bag, walked out.

His anger had increased rather than diminished by the time he reached the street. Such talk as this could ruin him as a respectable rancher as well as a candidate for office, and he suddenly knew that, as a rancher, he had to do something about it—at once. The Gazette's editor, Ben Hackett, was the man to start with.

CHAPTER TWO

Big Tim

BEN HACKETT was always to be found in one saloon or another after dark. He was in the Trail House this rainy night, at a table in a corner, with a bottle and a glass in front of him. He was a seedy little man of about fifty, with sparse gray hair and gold-rimmed glasses. His threadbare clothes were unkempt, and his hands were always stained with printer's ink. What money his newspaper made, Ben Hackett drank up. He seemed to be a man with a past he needed to forget.

Langley passed up the dozen or so other men in the place, with only a nod. He received no hearty greetings. In fact, he was aware that the men who glanced at him did so with doubt in their eyes if not

with a measure of hostility. They had read the *Gazette*, of course.

Hackett's chin was on his chest, his eyes staring at nothing, when Langley stopped by his table. He roused himself, looked up slowly.

"How did Grady get to you, Ben?" Langley asked, not unkindly despite his anger. "He used something besides money, I'd bet."

"John, I'm sorry."

"That helps," Langley said bitterly. "It helps a lot."

"Sometimes a man is not his own master, John," Hackett said. He was drunk, and as always when drunk, he was full of self-pity. "A man tells himself that he has ethics, that he'll publish nothing but the truth, then—" he paused, hiccuped—"then along comes another man and reminds him that his soul's not his own." He poured another drink with a shaky hand, spilled some of whiskey lifting the glass to his mouth. He downed the drink, shuddered, wiped his mouth on his coat sleeve. "A man back in Kansas horsewhipped me once for printing the truth about him. Another man in Idaho, twenty years ago, tried to use a gun on me."

"You know what I want of you, Ben."

"A retraction? An apology?"

"No. I want to know how Big Tim Grady means to link me with the Sandrow wild bunch," Langley stated. "He must have told you, else you wouldn't have printed that lying story—even though he's got some hold on you. What kind of evidence has he trumped up?"

Hackett's bespectacled eyes drifted away from him, peered at something beyond Langley. "Why don't you ask Big Tim?" he said. "There he is now." A sneer showed on his weak face. "Big Tim Grady, the voter's friend!"

Langley turned and recognized Big Tim Grady at once, for he'd run into the man several times during his campaigning. He also knew a little of the man's background. Grady had had his early schooling in politics in Boston, had promoted himself to the wider field of New York, then graduated to Chicago. He'd been involved in the stockyards riots there, and, forced to flee under a cloud, he'd come west where politics was in its infancy and done well by himself. Grady was a power behind the scenes. Never seeking office for himself, he backed other men—men he could control. The result was bad government for the people and enormous graft for Grady and his crowd. The presence of the political boss in Denton City was significant; it meant that Big Tim Grady was worried enough about John Langley's chances to take active steps to head him off.

He was a bulky, florid man a few years older than Langley. He wore Eastern clothes, a gray derby and a broadcloth suit of the same shade. There was a dia-

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mond stickpin in his tie, and a heavy gold watch chain was draped across his vest. He showed a gold tooth as he smiled widely and called out heartily, "Step up, friends! The drinks are on me."

There was a movement to the bar, for politics had nothing to do with men's thirst. Langley crossed to Grady and said, "The man who drinks with you, drinks with a liar. I'm calling you now, Grady. That story you gave out about my being with the Sandrow wild bunch was a lie."

Grady's smile broadened. He even chuckled. "I've been called worse things than a liar in my time, Langley," he said easily. "But this time I'm not guilty. Your connection with the rustling crowd will be proved in due time."

"Just before election day, eh?"

"As good a time as any," said Grady. "So the voters know they shouldn't cast their ballots for a man who's thrown in with rustlers and horse thieves. As for the proof—"

Langley caught Grady by the lapels of his coat.

He slammed the man hard against the bar. He let loose, brought his hand up, slapped Grady across the mouth. In the dead silence that followed, he said thickly, "You won't fight when you're called a liar. Maybe showing you up for a coward will do it. You ready?"

Grady remained slumped against the bar, his smile wavering, and an ugly look of hate in his eyes. "I'll be ready in my own good time, Langley," he said flatly. "It was only politics before, but now it's a personal matter. You'll hear from me—when I'm ready."

He reached into his pocket, tossed a bill onto the bar, then turned and walked from the saloon. Langley muttered an oath, then faced the bar and ordered a drink. He downed it, but felt no better. He'd only made a fool of himself tonight, and Big Tim Grady had burned the rustler brand that much deeper into his hide.

RAINING the way it was, the sensible thing would have been to take a room at the hotel for the night. But John Langley was sick and tired of crowded places suddenly, and he went to Gleary's livery stable for the horse he'd put up there before leaving on his trip. Hank Gleary wasn't around, so Langley turned up the flame of the lantern that hung on one of the posts just inside the doorway. He found his gray gelding in one of the stalls, got his saddle from the tackroom, and in a few minutes rode out.

Gleary's place was close to the railroad, and as Langley swung away he glimpsed three men walking along the tracks toward town. It was too dark for him to identify them accurately, but he was sure that they were the hardcases he had encountered on the train. Evidently they hadn't wanted him to know that their destination was Denton City and so had traveled a couple of miles farther before dropping off the train. Langley suddenly understood why Big Tim Grady had said he'd fight in his own good time. The political boss was waiting until he had somebody siding him, and these three were the reinforcements he expected. Smiling grimly, Langley rode on along Main Street and west out of town. He wasn't without friends of his own; his ranchhands would be loyal, no matter what kind of slander was flung at him.

It was a dozen miles to Langley's ranch headquarters, and he got home after midnight. Late as it was, Will Harmon came out to welcome him and take his horse. Lanky and leathery faced, Harmon was the JL's foreman. "Good trip, boss?" he asked.

"Good and bad, Will," Langley said. "Politics can be a dirty game. Come over to the house when you've put up the dun. We'll have a drink and a talk."

He went on to the stone-and-log house,

lighted the lamp in the room he used for an office. He took off coat, vest and hat, removed his tie and opened his collar, relaxing for the first time in weeks. He took a bottle and cups from a cupboard, placed them upon his desk, then poured the drinks when Will Harmon came in and removed his slicker.

"Here's to the good old days," he said, lifting his cup.

After they'd drunk, Harmon said, "Sick of it, John?"

"It's the dirtiest fight I've ever been in," Langley replied, "but I want to win it. I want some information, Will. Have we been losing any stock to rustlers?"

"Not in two, three years. Those long-ropers knows better than to night-ride across the JL range."

"Any signs of the Sandrow crowd?"

"They're still holed up in the Badlands."

"That's wild country," Langley said, thinking out loud more than talking to his foreman. "I wasted a week once, trying to pick up Matt Sandrow, and then wouldn't have found him if he hadn't gotten curious and ridden out to meet me." He gave Harmon a narrow look. "You think we'd have any chance of rounding up that wild bunch?"

"We could do it if can be done," Harmon said. "But the law never managed it, and Sandrow's been holed up there for more than a year. It'd be a tough chore, boss."

"Well, I'm just thinking," Langley said.

He spent the next day looking after things at the ranch, riding much of the time with Will Harmon. He worked on his account books for an hour late in the afternoon, then cleaned up for his trip to town to spend the evening with Martha. He rode out after supper.

He stabled his horse at Gleary's, lighted a cigar, walked to Mrs. Lambert's house. He noticed along the way that the people he passed spoke to him with a new lack of enthusiasm. It was increasingly clear that he would have to take some bold step to offset the charge that he was linked with the Sandrow crowd, and the only possible step was the one he'd mentioned to Will Harmon—rounding up that wild bunch himself. He glanced at the banner strung across Main Street, and its bedraggled look seemed indicative of his whole campaign. He mounted Mrs. Lambert's porch, knocked on the door, and waited impatiently.

He knew something was wrong the instant he saw the dejected look on her face.

Mrs. Lambert was a gray-haired, motherly person. She was usually cheerful, but tonight her eyes were red-rimmed from crying. She told Langley to come in, her voice choked up. "It's Martha," she said, when they reached the parlor. "She's gone."

"Gone?" Langley said. "Gone where?"

Mrs. Lambert started crying. She held her apron to her face, and Langley had difficulty making sense of what she said. She'd loved Martha like a daughter, she was saying. She'd wanted her to be happy, and she'd been pleased when Martha became engaged. That was the proper thing for a girl, marriage. A husband and children. "Now, she's gone—for good!" Mrs. Lambert sobbed, tears streaming down her face.

Langley saw an envelope on the table that held the lamp. He saw his name written upon it in Martha's neat script. He picked it up, tore it open, unfolded the sheet of notepaper it contained. The few lines Martha had written told him little more than he'd gotten from Mrs. Lambert.

"Dear John," the note read, "Writing this is the hardest thing I ever did in my life. I'm sorry, truly sorry, but this is good-bye. I'm going away, and I won't return to Denton—ever. Don't try to find

me. I don't want to be found. I'm enclosing your ring. Martha."

The diamond solitaire that had been their engagement ring was in the envelope. Langley turned to Mrs. Lambert, a stiff look on his face.

"She left because of this story that I'm mixed up with the rustling crowd?" he demanded.

"I don't know. She wouldn't give me a reason."

"You don't know where she's gone, do you?"

The woman shook her head, started crying again. "All I know is that she packed all her things and had her trunk and bags taken to the station. She wouldn't confide in me. She was crying when she left."

Langley jammed the note into his coat pocket, turned to the door. He strode to the station. There were only two trains a day, the westbound at eight o'clock at night and the eastbound at ten in the morning. Langley found Andy Hatch, the stationmaster, sweeping the little waiting room. He asked his question, and Andy said, "Sorry, Mr. Langley. Miss Trevor left on the eastbound this morning. But she didn't buy any ticket from me. She must have figured on paying the conductor."

So he wouldn't find out where she was going, Langley thought bitterly. Damn politics.

He knew too that she wouldn't have paid for the entire trip. She would have known that he might get in touch with the conductor of today's eastbound, so she would pay her fare to a place that was not her actual destination. She would change trains somewhere along the way, leaving a trail that he could not follow. Langley was gripped by a sense of loss, but the hurt was all the greater for his knowing that Martha had walked out on him because of that mud slung at him. She should have had more faith.

CHAPTER THREE

Badlands Rendezvous

FOR A MOMENT, John Langley felt that he could no longer put his heart into the game. If Martha believed that slander, certainly everyone else would believe it. He knew how people's minds ran. They would suspect now that the prosperity of his JL Ranch was based on his connection with the Sandrow crowd, and in time most of them would be convinced of it. The state was cattle country except for a little mining and some dirt farming, and the cowmen, whose votes counted most, would never cast a ballot for a man tainted by the rustler brand.

Langley saw more clearly than ever that he could prove himself innocent—falsely charged—only by rounding up Matt Sandrow and his crowd. But he felt too jolted by Martha's letting him down to care about clearing himself. In fact, Langley doubted that he was the man for the job of Governor without Martha at his side. He'd counted on her advising him in how to act while holding such an office. He'd needed her knowledge to back up his experience. Martha's schooling would have made up for his lack of it. She had gone to college, and he had gone to a country school only long enough to read and write and figure a little. The open range and cattle trails had given him his real education, and it certainly was not adequate for a man aspiring to be Governor of even a sparsely settled cow-country state.

Still, Langley realized, a Governor could appoint educated men to side him in matters requiring special knowledge. And in the end, no matter whom he depended upon for advice, he would have to make use of his own common sense. Too, he'd made his promises to the voters. He'd promised them the thing they sought, honesty in the state capital. He couldn't

back down. It wasn't in him to welch on a bet. He was in the fight, and—by damn! —he'd see its finish.

He turned away from the station, grimly determined, accepting his loss for the moment.

Sheriff Pat Meehan was in his office talking to his deputy, Pete Lorry. Langley said, "Pat, I want to talk about the Sandrow crowd. More than that, I want to do something about that bunch—to prove I'm not mixed up with them. How about getting Ben Hackett here, so he can print our side of it in his paper?"

"Hackett has thrown in with Grady, John."

"I know that. But he's basically honest. He'll print the news despite Grady. And this is going to be news—not political talk."

Meehan thought it over, a frown on his heavy red face. Then he said, "Pete, if you catch Ben now, he may not be too drunk," and Pete Lorry went out.

Meehan said, "You know I tried to round up that wild bunch, John. I took a posse into the Badlands and spent a couple weeks hunting for Matt Sandrow and his band. When I picked up their trail, they pulled out into the next county. And probably laughed at me. A month later they were back, running off cattle again. The sheriff of Blair County is a Grady man, and he won't cooperate with me because I'm on the other side of the political fence."

Langley nodded, admitting that he understood Meehan's position. He said, "We'll work it without his help. How much do you know about Matt Sandrow?"

"Nothing much. I never met up with him," Meehan replied. "All I know is what I learn from dodgers that come in on him. He didn't come up here until about a year ago. Texas, New Mexico and Arizona were his old stamping-grounds. Things must have gotten too hot for him there, so he drifted north." He took a fat sheaf of wanted circulars from his desk. "He's about sixty years old, black-bearded, blue-eyed, hook-nosed. Tough. He's wanted for stealing cattle and horses by at least fifty peace officers. So far as I know, he's not wanted for any killings.

"He had a bunch of children, one a girl. Seven boys. Three of his sons still ride with him. One named Frank went straight. He's the youngest. Went to school back East, got to be a doctor. He settled in St. Louis. Ollie and Luke were killed by Texas Rangers about five years ago. They struck out for themselves and turned to bank robbery. . . . I have a separate dodger on another that quit Matt. Bert, his name is. He's next to the youngest. He's wanted for killing a man in Cheyenne, because of a woman. Russ, Clet and Purd are with Matt."

MEEHAN tossed the dodgers back onto his desk. "If you met Matt in the Badlands, like you said the other night, you probably know more about him than I do. What's he like?"

"Tough and smart."

"And you think you and I can round him up."

"I cornered him once, twenty years or more ago in Texas," Langley said. "I told you I'd known him in Texas. My foreman, Will Harmon and I, lost some horses. We took up the trail and came on Matt Sandrow's hideout ranch. We were just young bucks then, with a lot of guts and luck. . . ."

He paused, lighted a cigar, recalling that day so long ago. It had been shortly after the war, during troubled times for Texas, when the range was overun with all sorts of renegades. They'd found the stolen horses in Matt Sandrow's corral, gotten the drop on Matt, sworn they would string him up for the horse thief he was. They hadn't dropped a rope around

Matt's neck, however. . . . Langley could still see the frightened faces of Matt Sandrow's woman and kids, though he hadn't called it to mind for many a long year until this moment.

Mrs. Sandrow had been a scrawny soul in a faded gingham dress. Her hair had been stringy, her face pale, and she looked hungry. She'd had a squawling baby in her arms, and the rest of the Sandrow brood huddled about her. It hadn't been possible to hang a man with such a family. Matt Sandrow hadn't whined or begged for his life. He'd simply explained that he'd stolen the horses to get hold of some money for food. And he'd been proud of his family. Langley recalled that he'd boasted, "Eight of 'em. Seven boys and a girl." The girl had been seven or eight, in a rag of a dress, and barefoot, with eyes as big as saucers. But she'd had spunk. "You ain't going to harm Pa," she'd said, and she'd gone and taken Matt's hand. "We won't let you!"

Matt had chuckled and said, "This one and another—the boy with the yellow hair—ain't rightly mine. Took 'em away from a Comanchero a couple years ago. But I'm Pa enough for them, now."

"That's how it was that we let Matt go," Langley said, after telling Sheriff Meehan all that. "Will and I even gave him a couple of the horses to sell, so that he could feed his family. But he never changed. He stole his way through life, and he's still at it. It's queer that one of his kids turned out all right, the one who became a doctor."

Meehan nodded, and said, "Wonder what happened to his wife and the girl.

At that moment Pete Lorry came in with Ben Hackett.

The newspaper editor was as unkempt and seedy as usual, but he hadn't yet gotten far along on his nightly drunk. He peered at Meehan and Langley through his glasses and said edgily, "Don't count on me for anything you're cooking up. I've a son who got in a jam, and Grady's holding it over me. That no-good snake will send my boy to prison if I don't string along with him and his crowd. Damn it, why can't you let me alone?"

Langley suddenly understood many things about Ben Hackett. He said, in kindly fashion, "I'm sorry about your son, Ben. And I won't ask you to climb back onto my bandwagon. But you're publishing a newspaper, and it's up to you to give your readers the news. All I want is for you to print in the next edition of the *Gazette* that Sheriff Meehan had sworn me in as deputy so that I can legally round up the Sandrow crowd."

"Lord, John, you can't do that! Not you!"

"Why can't I, Ben?"

"Because the Sandrows . . . ."

Hackett's voice trailed away, and fear showed in his eyes. "Nothing," he muttered, edging toward the door. "I didn't mean anything. The *Gazette* will print that, sure. Friday's press day. It'll be on the front page. I give you my word."

He turned and ducked out.

Langley frowned, looked at Meehan. "What do you suppose ails him?"

Sheriff Meehan looked puzzled too. Then he shrugged and said, "It'll still be your party, John, but I'm riding into the Badlands with you. It's more my job than yours. When do you want to start?"

"In the morning," Langley replied, still puzzling over Ben Hackett's behavior.

THEY TALKED an hour, making their plans, before Langley left the sheriff's office and went to the hotel to take a room. After signing the register, however, he realized that not only was it too early to turn in but that with so much on his mind—mostly Martha's going away—he wouldn't be able to sleep. He left the hotel and crossed to the Trail House. Big Tim Grady was at the bar, talking to

a couple of cowhands. The saloon was pretty well crowded, perhaps because word had spread that there'd been trouble in the place last night—between Langley and Grady—and the crowd hoped it would break out again tonight. Men liked trouble when it didn't involve themselves. Ben Hackett was at his corner table, a bottle before him. But Langley noticed that the bottle was still full. He bellied up to the bar, ordered a drink, ignoring Grady. As he lifted his glass he noticed the reflection of three men in the back-bar mirror—the three hardcases he'd encountered on the train. They were drinking at a table.

Langley downed his drink, took out a fresh cigar. As he struck a match and puffed it alight, Ben Hackett's creaky voice lifted above the other sounds in the place. "I'm talking, damn it!" he shouted. He was at the bar now, near Grady. "You hear me, Grady? I'm talking—and my boy can take his medicine for what wrong he's done!"

Big Tim Grady growled, "Shut up, you fool!"

Langley called out, "Talk, Ben! You've friends here. Nobody's going to lay a hand on you!" He saw the three hardcases rise from their table, their gazes questioning Grady. "Keep out of it, you three," Langley ordered, reaching under his coat and gripping his gun.

The crowd was quiet and still, and the bartender brought a shotgun from under the bar and lay it across the top. "If Ben's got a piece to say," he said warningly, "he's free to talk in here."

Hackett was on his feet. He shook a defiant fist at Grady and said wildly, "A man can stomach only so much, and I've had enough of your blackmailing!" He shifted his gaze to Langley. "John, if you marry Martha Trevor, you'll be playing right into Grady's hands. That school teacher is Matt Sandrow's daughter. Matt sent her East to school when she was fifteen. He educated her and made a lady of her. But she's a Sandrow, and Grady is just waiting for you to make her your wife so he can tell the whole state that the man running for Governor on an honesty ticket is related by marriage to the biggest rustler band in these parts!"

It took Langley a long moment to get over the shock he felt. He could hardly believe that the ragged girl he'd seen at Matt Sandrow's hideout ranch in Texas could have grown into a person as wonderful as Martha Trevor. But he had to believe it. One of Matt's sons had become a doctor, so it was possible for his daughter to have become a school teacher.

"If you go after Matt, you'll lose the girl," Ben Hackett went on. "If you marry her, you'll never get to be Governor—and Grady'll still be in the saddle. It's true about her, Langley. Grady found it out from one of his hired hands—that young tough there, Bertie Vance." He pointed to the young hardcase who'd braced Langley on the train. "He's one of Matt Sandrow's kids. He's the girl's brother!"

A sneer showed on Bertie Vance's coarsely handsome face. "The old fool's talking gospel," he said cockily. "I'm one of the Sandrows, and so is the girl your candidate for Governor is marrying." He backed toward the swing doors. "Guess that finishes up my job here in town. S'long."

He ducked out, laughing. His partners followed him.

Big Tim Grady was studying the crowd with sharp-eyed interest, trying to figure out what the reaction to all this might be.

Langley didn't know how to take the revelation. It was gratifying to know that Martha had broken their engagement and gone away to save him embarrassment, of course. But if he rounded up Matt Sandrow and his crowd, she would be hurt—so badly hurt that she would never forgive him. But Martha wanted him to be Governor. She had said so often that an honest

man like himself was needed in the state capital. Langley knew that he would go through with it, even though Martha was hurt more.

He turned to Big Tim Grady with a thin smile. "You may as well pull out of Denton," he said. "There's nothing more you can do here. I'm going after Matt Sandrow, and I'll bring him in." He paused, and his voice hardened. "Once I'm Governor, I'm going to dig up enough evidence of graft to put you behind bars. You've had your day, Grady!"

Grady gave him a hate-filled look, walked to the swing doors. He paused there, and said, "You're not elected yet, mister." He batted the doors open and went out.

THE BADLANDS lay beyond the Swayback Mountains, a range of low rock hills. The posse entered the malpais through a narrow pass ten miles west of JL headquarters. Langley and Sheriff Meehan rode in the lead, and behind them came eight of the JL crew, including Will Harmon, with two pack horses. The sun was high overhead, and the waste of sand and rock and lava beds stretched endlessly ahead of them. They held their horses to a walk, to save them, but they headed directly toward the spot where Langley had encountered Matt Sandrow a year ago.

"It was at a water hole," Langley told the lawman. "I'm not sure we'll pick up the trail there, but I've a hunch that he rode out to meet me that time because I was getting close to his hideout."

He had hope that something would come of starting the search at the water hole. It was his only hope of tracking down the rustler crowd, for the Badlands, forty miles wide and seventy long, afforded a thousand places for men to hole up in, and only an army of men with unlimited time could ferret them out. Langley didn't want this to turn into a game of hide-and-seek.

In one way, he felt guilty about hunting down Matt Sandrow to assure his election. The old rannihan hadn't bothered JL stock. However, Langley had promised to bring honest government and vigorous law enforcement to the state. This would be a start in that direction. Matt Sandrow had played hob with the law long enough. As for Martha—Langley told himself that Martha would have to understand.

They camped at sundown in the middle of nowhere, without lighting a fire or having any water except what they'd brought along in canteens. Langley told Meehan, "We'll find that water hole some time tomorrow." In the morning they were in the saddle before the sun was up, trailing southwest. Langley sighted a familiar spire of red rock at midmorning and headed in its direction. The water hole, if he remembered correctly, was just beyond the spire.

The rock grew steadily higher as they trailed on hour after hour, and late in the afternoon it loomed over them like a gigantic church steeple. They circled its eroded base, and in the distance saw a patch of green against the red-brown waste. It was the brush-fringed water hole. A mile or more beyond loomed a tortuous mass of rocky uplifts, and it was among those holes, in some hidden canyon, or so Langley believed, that Matt Sandrow had his hideout.

Keen-eyed Will Harmon swung up alongside Langley and said, "Somebody there, boss."

A moment later Langley saw that Harmon was right.

A man was there at that lonely desert tank. . . .

There was plenty of time for him to mount and ride for the hills, but he remained by the water hole and let his ground-hitched horse browse. He was hunkered down, puffing on a stubby clay pipe, a big man with streaks of gray in

his black beard. A beak of a nose jutted from his hairy face. His eyes were a china blue, and there seemed to be mocking laughter in them as Langley and Meehan rode slowly up. The sheriff's hand was at his gun, and he growled, "Sandrow, you're under arrest."

Langley reached out and touched Meehan's arm, restraining him. He was puzzled. He couldn't understand why Matt Sandrow was waiting there. It wasn't like the old rustler who had always been too slippery for the law to catch. Langley swung down, faced Sandrow.

"Knew we were coming, didn't you, Matt?" he said.

"Figured you might come when I heard how things were, John."

"How'd you hear about it, out here?"

Sandrow took his pipe from his mouth, stood up. He was taller than Langley, well over six feet, without a stoop despite his sixty-odd years. "My girl Marty only went as far as Slade's Junction," he said, chuckling. "One of my boys, Clet, was there. Marty told him what was up, and he came riding hell-for-leather home." He gestured toward the rock hills. "I did some thinking. Always could outthink most other hombres, John. So knowing how your mind would work, I've been expecting you." A sudden anger showed in his eyes. "You settle with that no-good Bertie Vance?"

"He slipped out of town before the sheriff could place him under arrest," Langley said. "My fault. I didn't tell Meehan about him soon enough."

"A no-good," Sandrow said bitterly. "I tried to make a decent sort of him, but there's a rotten streak in him. I disowned him a couple years ago. That's gospel. But he never was my own flesh and blood. I just took him to raise when he was a four-year-old. Got him and Marty from a Comanchero. He'd got those two kids from the Comanches. The Injuns had raided the Vance and Trevor ranches, killed everybody, and carried off those youngsters. Marty did me proud, though. Like my son Frank, who's a doctor." The old rustler seemed about to burst with pride. "Yes, sir. I got a doctor and a school teacher in my family, even though the rest of my boys didn't turn out like I wanted 'em to. And you're marrying Marty, John. She's got her heart set on being your wife. And me, well, I've got my heart set on my daughter—even if she is only that by adoption—being the Governor's wife!"

Langley was amazed. He was sure there'd never been another man such as Matt Sandrow. "So you're giving yourself up so that Martha can have what she wants," he said. "You knew that she wouldn't marry me because my enemies would claim that I'd married into a rustler family."

"I stand by my kids that do right by

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me, John, and I'll string along now."

"But, prison, Matt?"

Sandrow chuckled again, and a look of cunning came into his eyes. "You're arresting me," he said. "You'll have me up for trial. That'll be fine. You'll make a big name for yourself. But the court'll have to prove I'm a rustler, won't it? And where's the evidence? You didn't catch me with any stolen cattle, did you?"

"I doubt if you can wriggle out that way, Matt."

"I'll take my chances, John," said Matt Sandrow.

Sheriff Meehan broke in, "Where's your hideout, Matt?"

Sandrow gave him a grin. "That's for you to find, Sheriff," he said. "Even if you should find it, there's no stolen cattle or horses there. And my boys have pulled out. They're on their way out of the state, and they won't be back. Well, I'm your prisoner. Let's get going."

Sheriff Meehan, still distrustful, took Sandrow's sixgun and rifle.

They watered their horses, built a brush fire and cooked up an early supper, then rode out and kept going all night. It was noon of the next day when they reached JL headquarters. "We'll get some rest before starting for town," Langley said, and Sheriff Meehan was agreeable.

CHAPTER FOUR

Ambush

THE THREE of them rode out at sundown on fresh horses, and it seemed to John Langley, who couldn't help but feel kindly toward their prisoner, that Matt Sandrow was in a low mood. He didn't talk. He stared off into the distance, a clouded look in his blue eyes. Sheriff Meehan, riding on the other side of him, seemed more kindly disposed toward him, too. All three knew that a man of Matt Sandrow's wild nature would find life behind bars unbearable. When the old outlaw finally spoke, it was gloomily. "Should've hightailed it and let you gun me down. It'd worked out just the same for you, John—and been easier for me."

"There's such things as paroles, Matt," Langley told him. "Maybe in a year or two . . ."

"Sure," Sheriff Meehan put in. "We'll work on it, old-timer."

Matt Sandrow just shook his shaggy head.

They rode without haste, and dusk gathered. They left JL range, took to a seldom-used road, approached Hatchet Creek and the ruins of Carter's trading post close to the main road to town. Nearing the ramshackle buildings, Langley thought he glimpsed a moving figure. Matt Sandrow's senses were even sharper.

"You meeting somebody here?" he asked.

"No," said Langley, pulling up.

"Smell tobacco smoke," Sandrow muttered. "Heard a horse stomp."

"Pat," said Langley, "do you suppose—"

A gunshot slammed against the quiet, powder flame blossoming.

Langley's horse spooked a little. As he fought to keep it under control, he heard Sheriff Meehan mutter an oath. The quiet closed in again, and then a voice yelled from the old buildings—shouting at Matt Sandrow. "It's Bertie Vance!" the voice yelled. "I've some boys with me—and we've been waiting for those tricky sons to bring you in! We're turning you loose, Matt!"

Another shot roared.

Langley felt the slug tear at his shirt where it bloused over his belt. Fear knifed through him, for Meehan and he were easy targets. He grabbed for his rifle, and Meehan, fighting his horse which was now acting up, drew his sixgun. Matt Sandrow bellowed an oath.

"Keep out of this, you no-good whelp!" he shouted at Bertie Vance. "I gave myself up, and I'm taking what's coming to me!"

"You'd better hightail it, old man!"

"I disowned you long ago! Keep out, I say!"

Sandrow's words were drowned out by more shots. Two other guns joined Bertie Vance's now, and it was clear that the ambushers didn't care whether Sandrow escaped—so long as they gunned down Langley and the lawman. Meehan got his horse under control and veered off into the brush, firing as he fled. Langley fired two quick shots, then followed the sheriff. Matt Sandrow galloped alongside him, keeping to the side nearest those blazing guns.

The brush closed about them, a screen but not a shield.

The ambush guns kept blasting, the slugs ripping and tearing through the bushes—probing viciously. Bertie Vance and his partners had picked a perfect spot for the bushwhacking. It was a narrow brush thicket, backed by a short but steep and rocky slope, treacherous for horses to climb even when not exposed to gunfire. To push on ahead meant that Langley and his companions would reach the creek, and again be targeted.

Langley said, "Get down, get down!"

He left his own mount and crouched low. Meehan dismounted, fired a couple shots, then started reloading his gun. He gave Langley a grim look. "Damn it, they've got us boxed in," he growled, a surprised tone to his voice. "A trio of cheap punks like that!"

Matt Sandrow dropped down beside Langley and muttered, "Punk or not, that Bertie is a killer. John, tell Meehan to give me back my guns!" There was no surprise in his voice; it was harsh with rage.

"Give him his irons, Pat."

"You mean it?" Meehan demaded. Then he said to Sandrow, "Get 'em out of my saddlebag."

THE FIRE lessened but did not quit entirely. The bushwhackers were reloading, or maybe conserving ammunition until they could see their targets. Langley waited for a powder-flash, then drove two rifle slugs toward it. He drew a lusty curse, but no scream of agony. Sandrow kept low, going to the sheriff's horse, but once he had repossessed his guns he came erect and so exposed himself. The three hidden guns opened up on him, and old Matt Sandrow staggered.

He fell, then got up—and triggered out four wild shots.

He came toward Langley at a lurching run, bent over, his breath rasping. He was hit twice in the middle of his gaunt body, and his shirt was dark with a wet stain. His lips were drawn back over clenched teeth in a stiff grimace of pain.

"They've got me," he said, gasping. "They'll get you, John."

"They'll get tired of it, Matt."

"Not Bertie. You don't know that Bertie Vance."

Langley gave him a curious look. It wasn't like old Matt Sandrow to know fear. Langley was jolted by a sudden thought: Sandrow was dying, and he knew it. Maybe it wasn't the thing to say, but he said it, "Matt, I'm sorry I dragged you into this."

"No regrets, John," Sandrow replied, his voice empty-sounding. "Wish you were out it, though. If you get out, be good to Marty. Tell her that—that I'm mighty proud of her." A spasm of pain swept over him. When it passed, he said, "The creek, John! Get to it—pronto!"

Meehan heard that. "Yeah. Maybe you can outflank them, John."

Langley didn't think that was what Sandrow meant; the dying man wanted him to run. But Meehan's idea was good, and Langley said, "Keep them busy." He

crept over to the sheriff. "Grady put them up to this. He knew that he couldn't beat me with ballots, so he figured that bullets would do the trick. We've got to take at least one of them in alive—to testify against Grady."

He caught Meehan's jerky nod, then continued to work his way through the brush. As he neared the creek, both Meehan and Sandrow opened up a covering fire. He slipped down the bank. It was about four feet high from the creek bottom, offering him sufficient cover. The water was shallow, merely splashing over his boot tops as he worked his way along the bank toward the trading post buildings. He paused once to reload his Winchester, then went on to a point opposite the buildings.

As he came erect, rifle ready, a minor hell broke loose.

The shooting was heavier than before. There was a thrashing about in the brush, and suddenly a wild-looking figure broke into the clear.

Matt Sandrow was charging the bushwhackers—alone.

It was the old rustler's last flow of strength. It carried him within ten yards of the decrepit shacks, both guns blazing. A bushwhacker screamed and went down, and Sandrow, hit and hit again, began to collapse. Langley didn't see him hit the ground. He was making his own charge. Bertie Vance saw him come over the creek bank, and the young killer opened upon him. Langley shot him through the head.

Sheriff Meehan and the surviving ambusher were making a duel of it, but both held their fire when Langley shouted, "You're the last! You want to die here—or save yourself by talking? What'll it be?"

As the bushwhacker hesitated, Langley closed in.

He and Meehan took a frightened prisoner.

THEY caught their gun-spooked horses, mounted, rode away—the prisoner in the middle. Meehan muttered something about sending Walt Givens, the undertaker, out for Matt Sandrow and the other two dead men. Langley only vaguely heard.

He rode in anger, with hate burning in his mind.

The prisoner had admitted that Big Tim Grady had ordered the ambush. The three hardcases were to have shot down Langley and Meehan, even if they didn't bring Matt Sandrow in. Grady had counted on the Sandrow crowd being blamed for the killings.

It was no longer a matter of politics. Grady had made it a personal thing, and now Langley, hating the man as he'd never hated anyone, knew that it had to be settled, once and for all, between the two of them.

Prison?

Men like Big Tim Grady were adept at evading prison.

No, Langley told himself, he wanted Grady with a gun in his hand.

But he knew that Grady was no fool; the man wouldn't play out his game to the bitter end, over blazing guns. Trick him into such a showdown? Langley doubted that Big Tim Grady could be tricked. But it was worth a try.

They rode into Denton and put their horses up at Gleary's livery stable. Langley said, "Pat, find out where Grady is. But don't let him know you're back in town." Meehan gave him a curious look, then nodded and went off. Langley and the prisoner, who admitted to the name Dodson, waited in the shadows of the barn until the sheriff returned, perhaps ten minutes later, to report, "Grady's at the Trail House, in a poker game."

Langley nodded.

He told Dodson, "You've got a chance to get out of this easy. Don't muff it. You go to the Trail House and tell Grady

you've got to see him. Act excited. Get him outside—around back of the saloon. Tell him the ambush misfired—that your partners were killed and that you were lucky to escape. You understand?"

Dodson nodded jerkily.

"Pat, give him your gun," Langley told the puzzled lawman.

Meehan would have removed the loads from the .45, but Langley said, "Loaded." When the weapon rested in Dodson's holster, Langley told the prisoner, "You're not to pull it—for any reason. If Grady tries to grab it, let him get it. You drop to the ground when the shooting starts. Now get going."

Meehan was worried. "It won't work, John," he said. "That Dodson will cross you up. I'm going—"

Langley interrupted, "Give me my chance, Pat," and moved away.

* * *

There was a litter of rubbish and an untidy stack of empty whiskey barrels out back of the Trail House. There was also a shack used as a storehouse, and Langley waited in its shadows. The waiting seemed long, and Langley began to fear that he'd made a mistake in believing that he could make use of a man like Dodson. Then the rear door of the saloon opened. Langley jerked back around the side of the shack so as not to be caught in the shaft of lamplight from within. He heard the door close, heard Grady's heavy voice growl, "What's gone wrong now?"

Langley came to the corner of the shack and saw Grady and Dodson standing by the pile of whiskey kegs.

Dodson's voice actually had fear in it, perhaps fear of Grady. He told Grady that Bertie Vance and Ed Dunn had been killed by Langley and Meehan, that he'd barely managed to escape.

Grady broke in ominously, "Why'd you stop here, you fool? Why didn't you keep on riding? If they catch you, they'll make you talk—"

Langley drew his gun, prepared to step from his hiding place.

Then he halted abruptly, for Big Tim Grady had stepped in back of Dodson and, with one powerful blow to the back of the head, felled the man. Grady rolled Dodson over onto his back, put both hands to his throat and began to choke him.

"Dead men can't talk. Is that the idea, Grady?"

The sound of Langley's voice brought Grady off Dodson's unconscious body. Grady had the look of a trapped wild animal. And for all his cunning, he acted as Langley had hoped. He grabbed for the gun in Dodson's holster, swung it up, began firing as fast as he could work hammer and trigger.

Three slugs tore through the planks of the shack behind Langley before he let the hammer of his weapon fall. Big Tim Grady, shot through the heart, slumped to the ground.

The gunshots had hammered through Denton, and people came running.

Meehan was there first, a gun in his hand, a question on his lips.

"You all right, John?"

IT WAS twenty miles to Slade's Junction, and Langley arrived there at midnight. The town was much smaller than Denton, but it boasted a grubby hotel. There was a dim light in the hotel lobby, but the desk was unattended at this time of night. Langley didn't make use of the night bell, which would have brought the clerk. He merely looked at the register, then climbed the stairs. He knocked on a door, and heard Martha's voice ask, "What is it?"

"It's John, Martha."

"John!"

"I've come to take you home," he said.

THE END

★ ★ Water, Fire—

Thrilling Gun-Law Novelette

How could well-driller Bill Burke hope to sell his services in that gun-ruled town, where the only excavating done was in the form of six-by-two holes — and blood was cheaper than water!

and Fighting Guts!

Bill's hand moved toward the butt of his Peacemaker as he turned toward Paulson, waiting for Paulson's move.

By ROBERT L. TRIMNELL

CHAPTER ONE

Well-Digger's Welcome

DRY GULCH woke up suddenly that afternoon. There were a lot of trail drovers, on their way back south from the railhead, sitting on the boardwalk and passing bottles around. A few storekeepers stood in their doorways, looking idly out at the dry, burning street. Suddenly they weren't loafing any more. They were rubbing their eyes and staring down the road.

Old Doc Hagers, looking out from the front door of his restaurant, spoke for all of them. "If that ain't the dangdest contraption I ever did see!"

The team of six powerful percherons was a pretty sight but not especially odd. It was the wagon, and the apparatus loaded on it: a huge boiler, a smoke stack, myriads of tubes, a fire-box. And lying flat on top was a twenty-foot derrick, extending out and over the two-wheeled cart that trundled along behind.

Doc Hagers pushed back his derby hat and scratched his thinning hair. He told Jake, the waiter, "If thet machine is what I got a idee it is, trouble's comin' ter the feller that's runnin' her."

The team headed in toward Doc's Dry Gulch Restaurant Hotel and Saloon. Doc and Jake watched a big fellow, with yellow hair sticking out from under his Stetson, climb down from the high seat. He turned toward them, a tall, powerful man with blue eyes, a wide jaw and the suspicion of a grin on his mouth.

"Say, friend," he said to Doc. "If there was somebody who'd get the hostler from the livery stable I'd sure appreciate it. My hosses need some water and hay."

Doc nodded to Jake, and the waiter hurried off to get the hostler. Doc took the fat cigar from his mouth and hurried forward. Doc liked to get where he was going before it wasn't there any more. He stuck a gnarled hand out at the blond man. "Doc Hagers, they call me."

"I'm Driller Bill Burke." His mouth began stretching sideways, and after a while Doc saw the widest grin he'd ever run into.

"Driller, eh?" said Doc. "Have a beer while yuh tell me what you're drillin', son. Come on in and step lively. Hope yuh ain't the kind of driller I think yuh are. That'd be plumb unfortunate here in Dry Gulch. Kat Paulson wouldn't like it. But the beer's good." Doc had stuck his cigar back in his mouth, and it bobbed as he spoke, keeping time to his gabby talk.

Driller Bill laughed, grabbed Doc's hand. He followed him into the restaurant.

Bill sat down at a table while the oldster ran over to a tap, jerked it open and ran out two foaming schooners of beer. He slapped them down on the table. He spun a chair around backwards, sat down astride it.

"Driller, eh? Water wells?"

Bill hefted one of the beers, poured a mighty draught down his throat. "Water," he said, and took another gulp of beer.

Doc pushed his derby back further, leaned close to the back of the chair and bit savagely on his cigar. "Boy, it's forty mile to the next town. A feller that figures on drilling wells would be a lot happier and healthier there."

DRILLER BILL sat up straight in his chair and stared at the oldster. "You aren't tryin' to chase me out of here, are you?"

The oldster laughed. "Me, no. I'd hire yuh myself, and feed yuh on the best steaks and beer you ever seen. But Kat Paulson—well, no, boy. Best yuh move on to the next town."

Bill Burke frowned and shoved his hat back. "Doc, I like you. And I'd bet on your word. But give me a reason!"

The oldster's voice dropped, and the cigar in his teeth seemed to sag. "Here comes the reason now, Driller."

The reason was a big, bull-chested man. A canary-yellow vest was stretched over his barrel-like torso. He was smooth-shaven, had a small black mustache and black hair. It was his lips that bothered Burke. They were thin and seemed to twist down at the right corner. Kat Paulson walked with the soft glide of a panther.

Without ceremony, he slid into a chair, rested heavy arms on the table. "I got work for you," he told Bill Burke.

The driller leaned back in his chair, blue eyes probing the man's face. That mouth.

It was cruel, ruthless. The rest of his face seemed bland in comparison. Bill drew a bag of tobacco and some corn-shuck papers out of his pockets. He rolled the cigarette slowly, staring into Kat Paulson's black eyes.

Paulson stared back at him. For a moment he seemed at a loss. Quietly, but with steel tipping his voice, he said, "I told you I got work for you."

The driller lit his cigarette. He blew out the match and stared at Paulson over the smoke. "You can go to hell," he said.

It hit Doc Hagers first. He pushed back a little from the back of the chair, moved a leg so his sixgun hung free. With his elbow he eased back his frock coat. The cigar hung limp in his mouth. His eyes flickered from the Driller to Kat Paulson. Paulson's face was working, his mouth drawn to a straight, cruel line. The driller just sat there, chair tilted back, left eye closing a little to dodge the cigarette smoke drifting up toward his battered hat. The cigarette hung down, burning slowly.

Paulson pushed to his feet. He stood for a minute, staring down at the driller. Then he turned, marched for the door. His tread was a little noisier this time, almost a pounding when he got to the boardwalk and turned to the left.

"Phew!" Doc Hagers breathed out. He yanked the cigar from his mouth, gulped at the beer. Then he shoved the black derby farther back on his head. "Jumpin' devils, boy! D'you know you just faced down the fastest gunman—well, faster'n—Listen, that Paulson's a killer! He's so near boss of this here town that—well, damn, Bill!"

The driller took a drag on his cigarette. "I don't like him, Doc. Reckon I'll start wearin' a hogleg."

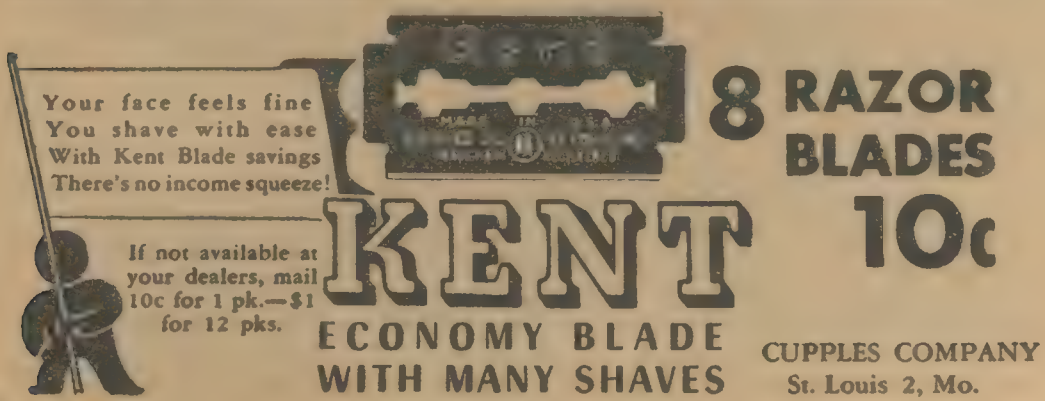
The oldster glanced at his waist. No gunbelt. "Yuh don't carry a hideout?"

"No. But I've got an old sixgun out in the cart I use sometimes. Doc, what's goin' on in this town? And by the way, you're no more doctor than I am. I've seen mossyhorn cow chousers in disguise before, and you're one of 'em."

Doc Hagers grinned at him. "Yer right, boy. Doc is my first name. My pappy was so anxious for me to be a doctor, he up and named me that. Yessir, Doc's my name. More'n any medico that ever lived." He took the derby off, bounced it on the table. "Took to wearin' that when I sold my ranch and moved here. Dry Gulch, bein' on the cattle trail, looked like a man could make a passel of money in it. Then Kat Paulson come in."

Jake, Doc's little waiter, walked in then. "Hosses are in the livery stable," he said. He noticed the empty beer mugs in front of the two men, came over and got them. He squirted beer into the schooners from the tap, as Doc continued.

"When a man gets ahold of the only



well in town—" He stopped and leaned forward, looking intently at the younger man. "Did you know that if the Rocky Mountains was gold, iron'd be more expensive? Shore, and if yuh live up in the Bear Lakes country, water's cheaper'n air."

Bill Burke nodded. "I get it. Paulson sells water. But you got to be king to do that, Doc."

"When yuh got a dozen gunnies hangin' around yer saloon, livin' like kings—"

"Sure. Then you're king." Driller Bill stood up, took the beer that Jake brought and poured it down. "That king stuff reminds me, Doc. I better go out and get my sixgun." He turned and strode toward the door. Doc watched him go, clomping in high-heeled boots, lean hips moving easily. For a well-driller, Doc thought, Bill Burke looked like a heck of a good cowhand.

DRILLER BILL glanced at the drilling outfit, at the empty traces. With the horses taken care of, one worry was off his mind. He glanced over across the street. A gaudy sign with gilded letters said "Kat's Saloon." The street was wide, lined with false-fronted stores, mostly unpainted. He spotted several men lounging in front of Kat's. He noticed that whatever they did, all kept their right hands free. The mark of the professional gunhawk.

He went out to the cart, rooted around under the tarpaulin and dragged out a heavy Colt and cartridge belt. He buckled the belt on and shoved the Peacemaker into holster. It felt comforting. A strange feeling, Bill thought, to a man who usually disliked carrying around that weight in hardware. But in Dry Gulch a gun seemed to be as useful as food or beer.

Bill went back into Doc's place. Doc Hagers was leaning against the bar, chewing his cigar. The driller said, "I've been thinkin', Doc. It might be unhealthy for my apparatus out there if I don't work for Kat Paulson."

The cigar bobbed in assent. "And I been thinkin', Bill, that for a well driller you make a heck of a good cowhand."

Bill's huge mouth opened in a grin. "Okay, Doc, we're both fakes. I won the rig in a card game. The former owner and I dug one well, so he could show me how. I'm as friendly with a well-diggin' machine as you are with that derby hat."

Doc pushed the derby back and grimaced. "But they's one hombre in this town that ain't a fake. Kat Paulson. He don't change. He came here a killer and he ain't changed a bit."

"No law here, Doc?"

"Sheriff's in the county seat at Injun Hill. He's a kind of ornery cuss. He says, 'Well, why don't yuh drill yer own wells? Why pay such prices to Paulson for water?' So we says, why, Paulson'd just have some of his gunnies blow us full of lead. And he says, 'Well, I'll go warn Paulson not to.' So Paulson tells him something like, 'Why, Sheriff, I wouldn't want anybody to get shot.' All the same, Bill, an old desert rat named Nate Sparks brought me in a couple kegs of water on his burro. We found him dead the next mornin'."

Bill Burke was rolling a quirly, frowning. "Seems a water deal in Dry Gulch needs to figure on Kat Paulson." He lit his cigarette, flipped the match to a spittoon. "I'm goin' to see Paulson, Doc. If you hear gunshots, call the undertaker." He turned, puffing on the cigarette, and strode out the door.

There were four men on the porch of Kat's place. They glanced at him out of the corners of their eyes. "Hi, boys," he said. He noted their guns, tied down low. And the free-swinging gun hands. He grinned at them, got four dark scowls in return.

A tiny piano was clanging out discord-

ant notes in the back of the saloon. A woman laughed shrilly. Two card games were in progress in smoky corners. Burke strode up to the bar. The bartender was a squint-eyed cuss who looked the driller over carefully, then proceeded to ignore him.

"Tell Paulson I want to see him," Burke said.

"Who's lookin' fer him?" rasped the bartender.

"An hombre that might drill him a well—if he acts nice and purty."

The bartender glared at him, then came out from behind the bar and went back to a small room in the rear of the building. A minute later Kat Paulson came out, followed by two of his gunmen. Paulson walked with his right hand raised a little, above his holster. He stopped a few feet in front of the driller, leaned against the bar.

"I decided," Burke said, "that maybe you and me could do business."

Paulson's eyes bored into him. "If I didn't need the work done—" He cut off what he was saying. The meaning was clear.

"Cost you ten dollars a foot," Bill Burke said. He took a last drag off his cigarette, looked intently at the butt. There was a spittoon in front of him, but he ground it out on the floor.

"Damn high price," Paulson growled.

"Payable each night after I knock off work." Bill rested his hand on the butt of the old Peacemaker and stared intently at the man's small black eyes.

For a moment it seemed that Paulson would object. He smiled thinly. Then he waved for Bill to follow, and they walked out through the batwings. They swung around the corner of the saloon. Behind was an open space, extending for a couple hundred feet. In the middle was a stone well, complete with a windlass and bucket. One of Paulson's men was sitting in the slight shade of the well. A rifle leaned against it, within easy reaching distance.

"She's runnin' dry," Paulson said. "That's why I want another. This is a dug well, just surface water. Seems like it's the only place in town where you can dig water."

"I'll start in the morning," Bill said. "Have a couple cords of wood here. I need it to make steam." Bill turned on his heel and left, shoulders squared. He felt uneasy. There were plenty in Paulson's gang that would shoot a man in the back. He told himself that they wouldn't. At least until the well was dug. But he still felt a shiver go up his back.

CHAPTER TWO

Only Blood Buys Water!

FROM Paulson's place, Bill went into Doc's place. It was full. Jake, the waiter, was running like mad, carrying more drinks than food. Bill saw Doc leaning over a schooner of beer, arguing angrily with three other men. Doc caught the driller's eye, waved him over and yelled to Jake for beer.

As he went to the table, Bill noticed the looks that were thrown at him, some angry and some sullen. Some looked at him with a kind of awe. He sat down at the table, and Jake shoved a beer under his nose.

"This is Driller Bill Burke," Doc told the three men. "Bill, these is Abe Hassock, Jeff Crane and Harve Forge." The three were middle-aged men, the first wearing range clothes, the others dressed in sober business suits. "Abe has Two J ranch, Jeff here is a lawyer and Harve has the local hardware store," Doc said.

Bill nodded to the three. Abe Hassock said, "You've come to an agreement with Paulson?"

"Yes. Ten dollars a foot."

Doc's cigar almost fell out of his mouth. "That's robbery, boy!"

Bill Burke grinned. "I like to rob

men like Paulson—makes life interesting."

They stared at him. Then Doc's voice dropped, and he leaned over toward the driller. "Look, Bill. We been figurin' that if you get out of town, maybe tonight, why maybe we've got Paulson. His well's runnin' dry. He'd have no good reason to stay here if he ran out of water. He might stay on with the saloon, but he'd have to get rid of all them gunnies. Couldn't afford to keep 'em."

Bill said, "An hombre like Paulson has other tricks up his sleeve beside water monopoly, Doc. You either got to get rid of Paulson or expect him to keep on robbin' you blind."

Abe Hassock said, "We don't figure it that way. We want the drill out of town tonight."

Bill pushed to his feet. He eyed the four, shoved the blond hair back under his hat and replaced the hat at a cocky angle. "I've never seen such a bunch of scared nincompoops in my life. You gents can all go to hell."

As usual his voice was calm, but inwardly the driller was seething with anger. He'd seen men die protecting their rights. He'd seen men pushed until they could take no more and turned like cornered wolves. But this was the first time he'd seen men lie down while a man like Kat Paulson spat and stomped on their bodies.

He turned his back to them and strode through the doorway. . . .

Bill left Mrs. Harris' boarding house early next morning. He got one of his teams, hitched it to the drilling rig. One would be enough, just to move it a few feet. There was a wide alleyway between Kat's place and the next building, Jeff Crane's law office. Rested, the percherons heaved forward, and in a minute the clumsy rig was turning, lurching through the ruts in the street and alleyway to the open space in back of Kat's place.

The usual guard was at the well. A couple of townsmen were filling buckets from the well, handing paper money to the guard. Bill shook his head. He'd heard more about the situation at the boarding house. About how Harve Forge hadn't bought water for some days. A rancher had brought him several kegs. Then one morning Forge showed up at the well with his bucket. His nose was near broken and his face badly cut. Kat Paulson made sure everyone did business with him.

The pile of wood he had told Paulson to get was already there. Bill unhitched the horses, took them back to the stable. The hostler promised to get a boy who would pitch wood for him. Then he returned to the site of the new well.

From the old well he got enough water to fill the boiler. Then he started the fire, feeding it through the furnace door at the wagon tailgate. He built it up to blazing heat, and closed all the petcocks in order to build a head of steam.

He took a shovel from the trailer, dug a hole a couple of feet deep. It was soft that far. The hole would guide the heavy steel drill. The drill was solid steel, six feet long and six inches in diameter, hung by a chain from the derrick.

AN HOUR later the boy came to feed wood to the fire. A bunch of curious townspeople crowded around too. At nine o'clock the safety valve blew off steam.

Bill scratched his head, wondering if he was doing everything right. His experience had been of the briefest. He shrugged, threw the valve that let steam into the motor. It turned over slowly. Sounded good. He dragged the drill around into position, lowered it into the hole. Over the clanking of the engine he yelled to the kid, "Throw in the winch."

The kid pulled a lever, and the drill chain went up. The drill slipped up through his hands, then began to slam down. He guided it in, felt it jar the

earth. Again the chain went up, again the drill slammed down.

In a half-hour the drill had a drop of ten feet. On the down stroke it was completely out of sight. That was when Kat Paulson came out to watch the work.

"Any chance for an artesian?" he said.

Bill shrugged. "There's always chance for an artesian. But I don't go deep enough with this outfit to have a good chance. You're likely to have to get a pump."

"Maybe this drill machine could be made into a pump."

For a while Bill let it sink in. For a minute he pretended not to have heard the saloon owner's voice over the racket of the machine. What Paulson meant was that maybe when the well was drilled there wouldn't be any more need for the machine. The owner might be in some place where he couldn't use it. Six feet underground, for instance.

He turned slowly, stared at Kat Paulson. "It might be made into a pump at that, Paulson. And it might not be you that was handlin' the water."

Paulson ran a big hand over his yellow vest. A thin smile showed on his face. "Lookin' for a partnership, Burke?"

"No."

Paulson turned to go. "Then keep your gun loaded, friend." He turned on his heel and left for the saloon. Bill stared after him, thinking how unhealthy it could be to complete a well in Dry Gulch. He thought of the townspeople. No guts at all. Bill drummed his fingers on his gun butt. Something would have to be done.

At noontine he went over to Doc Hagers'. Again the place was almost full, men crowded around the tables, muttering to each other. They scowled as Bill strode in, kept their eyes away from him. Doc was at a table with Abe Hassock and another man. Bill got an extra chair and sat down with them. Doc muttered a greeting.

"Looks like I'm between two camps," the driller said. There was no reply. He took out makings and rolled a cigarette, staring from one to the other.

"Boys," he said, "I'd sure like to know—"

Doc Hagers cut in, suddenly jutting his cigar at the driller. "Listen, son, we've got womenfolks here and children. We can't put 'em in the kind of trouble that'd come off if we go against Kat Paulson."

Bill decided that was true. "But look, Doc. If the women and children was some night to go visit friends, say out at Abe's ranch—"

"And every man in town would attack Kat's place? That'd be war, son. Not only the sheriff'd be on our necks, but troops would likely be called in."

Bill sighed. He took off his hat and ran a big hand through unruly blond hair. "When you boys get some guts," he said,

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"let me know. I'll tell Kat Paulson to send one of his gunnies over and pistol-whip the lot of yuh." He shoved to his feet.

"Sounds like yer sidin' in with Paulson."

Bill shrugged and turned to the door. Eyes flicked in his direction, and there were muttered curses. It beat all, he thought, how much some men could take. He strode out, back squared to them, and returned to his job.

WHEN the drill reached thirty feet, Bill Burke began to get ideas. He stood there wearing a heavy glove on his right hand, holding it against the drill every time it rose out of the hole and thumped back in. He could tell that way whether it was getting too hot. But at thirty feet it was getting wet. Just surface water. He wanted something better than that. But at thirty feet he had done three hundred dollars worth of work for Kat Paulson, and the saloon owner had paid him in cash. At noon of the fourth day he went over to Lawyer Jeff Crane's office.

He'd gotten used to having people ignore him. The ugly stares that he met on the street he shrugged aside. The worst thing was when one of Paulson's men called him "pardner." He didn't like that. In Dry Gulch the most dangerous place to be was in the middle. But it was the only honest place to be too.

Fat little Jeff Crane stared at him angrily when he appeared in the doorway. "What do you want?"

Bill pushed in and plopped into a chair, grinning at the little man. "I want to know who owns the land where I'm digging that well. I don't believe Paulson is the kind to even own a saloon."

Crane scurried around in back of his desk, put on a pair of gold-rimmed glasses. "Paulson doesn't even pay rent on the saloon." He glanced at Bill over the glasses, took a cigar out of his pocket and stuck it in his mouth. "I own the saloon and the land ten rods back from the street."

"How much you figure a piece of land five rods square with the new well in the center is worth?"

The lawyer bit off the end of his cigar and spat it at a waste basket. "It isn't worth that cigar tip I just bit off. You might say Paulson has squatter's rights on that land. But I don't— I just hold title to it."

Bill dug makings out of his pocket and started a smoke. When he had licked it closed he said, "Paulson don't have squatter's rights. He has what I call pistol rights." He lit the cigarette, stared at the lawyer over the flame. "Give you a hundred dollars for papers to that piece of land," he said.

Crane sat bolt upright. "You're a fool! Even if you side with Paulson, what good will the papers do you?"

Bill pushed to his feet. "I'll bring the money over tonight, if you have the papers ready."

Jeff Crane stared at him as he swung out the door. He adjusted his glasses and swore mildly. . . .

That evening as Bill was coming out of Crane's office he met Doc Hagers. He stuffed the deeds for his little piece of land in his pocket. Doc was hurrying up the boardwalk, derby hat pushed back and cigar jutting out at the world in a stubborn angle.

"What's this I hear about you buyin' the land where the well is?"

"Has Crane spread that story all over town?"

Doc's cigar twitched. "I dunno. Told me."

Bill scratched his head. "Maybe I'm thinkin' of resellin' it, Doc. What's it worth to you?"

" 'Bout a dollar."

Bill nodded. "See you later, Doc." And he marched off toward Mrs. Harris' boarding house.

CHAPTER THREE

Boomer

IT WAS at the boarding house that night that Bill began to catch on. Mrs. Harris' son wasn't yet twenty, but Bill saw him out in the kitchen, oiling up a shotgun that was longer than the boy himself. And in the dining room there was an undercurrent of subdued talk. A rancher came in carrying a short rifle, leaned it against the wall and draped his coat over it. He eased his Colt around to the side as he sat down. Bill began to glance around. There wasn't an unarmed man in the place.

He ate hurriedly, got his hat and went outside. There was war brewing in the town of Dry Gulch, and Bill knew that his well-digging apparatus was likely to be concerned with a good part of it. For a moment he stood on the porch, building a smoke and staring down the street. There were several men on the porch of Doc Hagers' cafe, huddled together, all looking in the direction of Kat Paulson's place. At Paulson's, there were just a couple of the usual gunhands, smoking with cigarettes cupped in the palms of their hands.

Bill moved slowly down the street. A feeling of apprehension stole over him. Plans were afoot that he knew nothing about. And no matter how they worked out he was likely to be caught in the middle. He had criticized the townspeople for being cowardly, and on the other hand the agreement with Paulson would last only as long as it was of benefit to both of them. The driller knew he couldn't be caught between. He had to act.

He cut behind Paulson's place, glanced at the gawky-looking drilling machine poised over the uncompleted well. Someone barked out, "Who's there?"

It was the well guard. "Driller Bill Burke," he answered with a slight growl in his voice. "Came over to see if that kid banked the fires in the engine." He climbed up on the rig, opened the fire door and glanced in, checked the steam-escape valves. He climbed down over the firewood, which was piled alongside. He retraced his steps to the street.

Bill glimpsed someone opening a shutter on the store next to Doc's place. A door was moved slightly. That meant they were going to fill the buildings opposite the saloon with armed men, ready to rake the front of Kat's Place. Bill smiled grimly. He had started this. He knew how men got cautious when their families might be in danger. He had shaken them loose from their apathy. And now they were ready to bust hell loose in Dry Gulch.

He cut down the street a short way, then back behind some buildings. He circled, came out on a small hillock in back of Kat's Place. Below was the old well with the guard leaning against it, the new well and the digging machine nearby. There was a back window and a door in the rear of the saloon. Then his search of the premises was interrupted.

From behind the store came three stealthy forms, taking advantage of every shadow. On the other side of the saloon he caught another movement. Six men in all, creeping up on the guard at the well.

Then one man came along the building, walking in the open and carrying a bucket. He whistled aloud. The guard jerked to his feet.

"Aim to get some water," the man with the bucket said.

"Come on." The guard leveled his rifle at the bucket carrier. That gave the men who were creeping in the chance they were waiting for. Three sprang out of the darkness, crashed into the guard. He started to cry out. The bucket carrier clanked a heavy steel bucket down on his head. The man slumped to the ground.

They all disappeared into the shadows, came back, each lugging a small keg. Bill caught the voices that drifted up to him.

"Jist splash the oil good on the back of

the building. I'll put the dynamite in the drill machine."

Bill's mouth went hard. That was Doc Hagers' voice. They were going to burn the owlhoots out of the saloon. The stores across the street would be filled with armed men, ready to cut them down as they left the burning building.

He decided it was time to act. He yanked his Colt out and came pounding down the hillock. He stopped in front of Doc Hagers.

"Okay, Doc. You're going to take orders from me. If I pull the trigger on this gun, Paulson's men'll come runnin' to see what's up. They'll bust your pretty little plan wide open."

DOC'S FACE twisted into a scowl. He yanked the derby hat down tight on his head.

"You sold out to Paulson, Burke?"

The driller grinned. "Just lookin' out for my own interests, Doc. Don't want my machine wrecked. You better not burn the saloon, either. The whole town'll go up in smoke. Everything here is like tinder. High cost for getting rid of them."

Doc chomped on a cold cigar. "Got any ideas?"

"Several. Have two men get up steam in the engine. But first we got to move it away." He signaled to them. Two men to a wheel, they rolled the drilling machine a hundred feet from the well, over behind the saloon. Bill directed them, heaved his mighty shoulder to the wheel at the same time. At last he straightened up.

"Good enough. Quiet now. Two men start firing the boiler." He climbed up on the machine, picked a piece of bent pipe out of the toolbox. He fitted it on a petcock, laid his leather gloves beside it. When he stepped down there was a mysterious grin on his face. He stood for a minute and listened to the banging of a piano inside the saloon.

"They'd hear a gun go off, Doc. But not much else. Now, we got a good use for that oil and dynamite you were talkin' about. Dump the oil into that new well."

Doc bit savagely on the cigar butt. "You're crazy, Burke. What's this—"

Bill raised a big hand. "Doc, I'll have those owlhoots come out unarmed. With fire you'd just get a hot-lead battle. You do like I say. Dump that oil you were goin' to burn the town down with into the well. Hurry up, or I'll start shootin', and that back door and window will erupt gunmen like a volcano."

Doc growled. But he had no choice. "Dump the oil in, boys." He and Bill watched while they broke open six kegs and poured oil down into the well.

"That's what you call seedin' a well, Doc." Bill grinned as his ideas took form. "One of the neatest confidence-man tricks in the game. You sell the sucker a well with real oil in it. Anybody can see the oil!"

"Got no time for that. We're out to bust Kat Paulson's gang!"

Bill laughed. "Right, Doc. Listen. I like to trade stuff. I told you how I got this rig. Well, I never swindle anybody except when they need swindlin'. And Paulson needs it. Now give me one of those sticks of dynamite you were goin' to blow hell out of my machine with."

Doc Hagers reached into his pocket, pulled out a stick, fuse and cap. "Only one I could find. Figured on settin' the oil off with it."

The driller took the stick, deftly cut into it and placed the cap, jammed the fuse into the cap and pinched it tight with his thumbnail. He got a length of cord from the tool box and tied it around the stick.

"Match, Doc?"

He lit the dynamite fuse while the other men stood around staring. "There's maybe five minutes of fuse there. You let her down the well until she floats on the oil. Ought to make a real nice fire. You keep out of sight." Then he turned and

hurried off to the front of the saloon.

He glanced across the street. There was no sign of the armed townsmen now. They were likely well hidden, waiting for the signal. He turned and pushed through the batwings.

Kat Paulson was playing cards at a table with three other men. Bill walked in and pulled a chair up. He glanced at Paulson's thin, twisted lips, at the canary-yellow vest.

"What's up, Burke?" Paulson said.

"Plenty." He nodded toward the other poker players, three of Paulson's gunhands. "We better talk alone."

Paulson smiled. "You got nothing that important, Burke."

Bill took out papers and tobacco, began building a quirly. "You'll die like a rat in a trap, Paulson."

MAYBE it was his tone that convinced Paulson. He signaled to his henchmen to leave. One by one they moved away from the table and over to the bar.

"You're surrounded, Paulson. Every man in Dry Gulch and from ten miles around is lined up across the street and in back of this place. In a couple minutes they'll start shooting. You've pushed 'em too far, Paulson."

"Who are trying to tell that to, Burke? There aren't enough guts in this town to attack a yellow dog."

Bill pushed to his feet. "I'm going, then. I don't want to get caught in this death trap."

Paulson snatched his arm. "Listen, I've heard you been acting funny lately, Burke. Maybe you got a scheme working. I hear you bought a piece of land in back of here."

Bill shoved away from the man. "I'm going. Two minutes or less is all they'll hold off."

Paulson's eyes narrowed. "What's your split in this, Burke?"

The driller turned soft blue eyes on him. "They're going to wreck my machinery and the well, to be sure you don't get a hold on this town again. Which finishes me. My split in this, like you say, is five thousand dollars. You won't get away with the money that's in your safe. They will. I know it's locked up in that big safe in your office. I want five thousand to get you out of here alive."

Paulson smiled. "And why did you buy the land in back of this place?"

Bill shrugged. "Speculation, maybe."

"Speculation for what?"

"That's my business."

The man stared at him, fingers drumming on the table. He tried to stare the driller down, black eyes boring into blue ones. But Burke didn't falter. He smiled right back at the saloon owner.

The explosion was well timed, Bill thought. Just enough doubts had settled in the gambler's mind. It came as a dull roar.

"Sounds like they're wrecking the wells first," Bill said. "I figure my well driller's next on the list."

As he spoke, a cloud of lead slammed through the batwings and windows of the saloon. Two men who had been standing at the bar crumpled to the floor.

"Knock the lights out!" Paulson yelled. Every man in the place dove for the floor, angled guns up and blasted at the hanging kerosene lamps. One by one they crashed to the floor. Total dark rushed in on them. Bill slid down under the table, watched the flashes as guns answered the fusillade from across the street.

"Burke!"

"Here."

Paulson crawled over to him. "Come with me."

Bending low, they hurried out to the office in back of the place. Paulson stuck his head up to look out the window. The window shattered as lead whistled into the room.

"Burke! The well's on fire!"

Bill grinned. Naturally it was on fire.

He could see the red glow of it shining into the room.

"That's oil, Burke. That's why you bought it on speculation, because you found oil sign."

Bill settled back to wait. "Maybe they dumped some oil in and set it on fire, Paulson."

Paulson laughed. "What would they do that for? No, that's oil. They dynamited and broke through the crust. That's the way they usually start a well." He laughed, a little hysterically. "Thought they were wrecking it!"

"I'll let you take the chances, Paulson. You can buy the well if you want. I'd rather get cash and clear out of this town. Had nothing but trouble here."

Paulson's eyes flickered out to the burning well, then over to the driller. "Hmm. I could sell stock to a development company without coming near this place again." He ducked as a bullet crashed through the wall from the front of the saloon.

"For ten thousand I'll get you out of here and sell you the well. All you got is my word for it, but—"

The saloon owner glanced around him, listened to the thunder of shots from the front of the saloon. Sweat stood out on his brow.

"Nothing else I can do." Paulson hurried over to the corner of the room, twirled the knobs of a big safe. A minute later he closed it, handed a bundle of bills to the driller, stuck another bunch in his pocket.

Bill counted them over, sighed with satisfaction. He stuck them in his pocket.

"Okay, Paulson. I said I'd get you out of here. Stand behind me. I'm even going to have Doc Hagers sign these deeds, since he's justice of the peace." He slid the bolt open on the back door, called out, "Doc! It's Burke. I'm comin' out."

With Paulson skulking behind, the driller stepped down to the ground. He heard the man behind suck in his breath as he saw the burning well. It did look real—a column of fire sixty feet high, burning furiously.

"Doc, I've made a deal with Paulson. He's riding away. The safe is full of money he's stolen from the people in town here. And the rest of the gang will give up easy when they find he's gone. You're buyin' out cheap."

There were growls from the others. Doc seemed too stupified to say anything. Bill took out the deed papers, rapidly signed them with a pencil.

"Sign here, Doc. As justice of the peace you can make this legal."

"You play a funny game," Hagers growled. He scrawled his name at the bottom of the paper.

Bill handed it to Paulson. "Now get a horse and ride! Next time you show your face in Dry Gulch it'll call for a hangrope. Ride!"

The gambler hurried over to a shed near the saloon, wheeled out a horse, saddled it rapidly. Without looking back he rode away.

"Now what?" Hagers said. "You better finish things in a hurry or we'll take it out of your hide."

BILL vaulted up on the drilling machine. As he did, a whiff of steam came out of the safety valve. He slipped on his leather gloves, twisted the pipe on the petcock to where he wanted it.

"Okay, Doc. Blow the door off its hinges."

Hagers grinned as he caught the idea. He stepped up to the door, placed his Colt close to the hinges and began thumbing hammer. When the gun was empty he kicked the door flat.

The shots brought several men to the back of the saloon.

Bill roared out, "Surrender in there, or I'll fill that place with hot steam!"

He was answered by a flurry of shots.

He ducked down behind the boiler and twisted a valve. Like a thing alive, steam under explosion pressure boiled out, lashed into the office, through it into the saloon. He heard screams, gritted his teeth.

"Come out reachin'!" he bellowed.

The firing stopped. He saw faces peer toward him. The flame of the burning well showed him crouched over the machine, one gloved hand on the steam pipe, the other on the valve. He screwed it tight, waiting for them to come out. Then he moved a little away from the boiler. It was getting too hot. One of them fired. He ducked, heard the lead crash into metal. He looked up, saw that the safety valve was smashed. Whether they needed it or not, he was going to have to shoot off more steam, or the boiler would blow.

Inside, someone yelled, "Rush 'em!"

Coolly, Bill twisted the valve. Steam screamed out in one blast, through the doorway, flooding the office. He closed the valve again.

"Enough!" somebody called from inside. "We're comin' out." To punctuate his words, there were shots from across the street.

Bill turned to Hagers. He grinned. "That's it, Doc. Here they come."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when it happened. A gunshot out of the darkness. He heard the whistle, felt something burn along his scalp and ricochet off the boiler. For a moment everything was black. He tumbled down. Slamming into the ground almost brought him to. The flaming well was no more then a dull glow in the black, and his head whirled. Painfully he raised himself. The crashing of guns was all around him, but it was like a meager popping of firecrackers. He dragged himself away from the machine on his belly. For the thought was burning through his mind. That boiler would blow up! The escape valve was wrecked, the other securely turned off. He scrambled frantically, heard the rifle crack again. His mind cleared enough to spot it. Up on the hillock from where he had watched Doc and the others ambush the well guard. He knew it was Paulson. The man wasn't content to carry away cash besides the papers to what he thought was an oil well. He wanted the money in the safe, all of it. And he had to free his men to get it. Bill heard the gun roar again,

One man started to run. . . .

and a man near him groaned, slumped to the ground.

Suddenly everything cleared. He stood up, wavering, felt blood trickle down his neck. He saw the spurt of flame on the hillock.

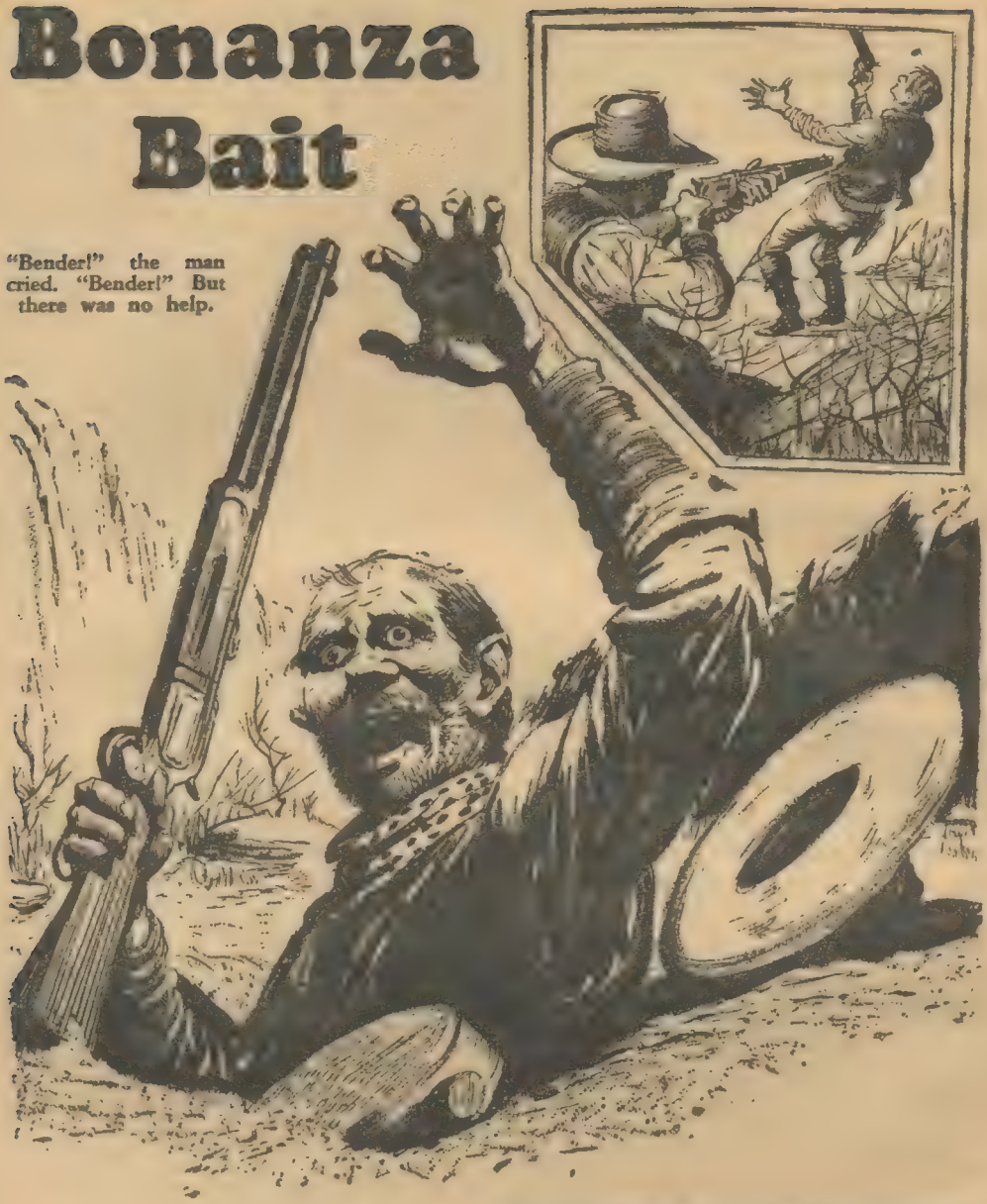
"Boiler—going to—blow!" he croaked out to those around him. They started to run, and at the same moment men began to stream out of the saloon.

Bill pounded up to the hilltop. He knew the bushwacker would cut them down one by one if he weren't stopped. Suddenly he realized that there was nothing in it for him. He could escape. He could join the running owlhoots until he had a chance to get away. There was a small fortune in his pocket. But he was running up the hill. Why? A bullet slashed past. He owed it to Doc and the rest. That was why. He yanked out his Colt.

The ruddy light of the burning oil showed Kat Paulson shoving up on one knee, yanking hammer on his revolver. Bill stopped, Colt leveled. For a split second they stared at each other. Then, very calmly, Bill triggered twice. He saw the gun burst into flame, felt something hot

(Continued on page 128)

Bonanza Bait



"Bender!" the man cried. "Bender!" But there was no help.

By BARRY CORD

Crazy Bill Bender's boy wasn't so dumb. For what better bait can a man use to snare a human snake, than a mountain of gold — just waiting for the greedy jasper with enough guts and guns to claim it?

HE WAS Crazy Bill Bender's boy —a lean, wiry youngster of seventeen, dark as an Apache and as solitary as a lobo wolf. He was born within sight of Guadalupe Peak, and he knew that savage, inhospitable country better than any white man in or around the east-

ern spurs of that barren part of the west.

He might have been born in California, but for a fluke. His father had come into Coldwater, driving a wagon through Guadalupe Pass, and he had stopped over in the mining town because his wife was big with child and the rough journey had weakened her more than she could stand. Bill Bender was a youngish man then, tall and straight—an Iowa farmer pulling his stakes and heading west for California where his brother had land he wanted to share.

He lingered in Coldwater just long enough to get the itch. The solemn sweep of the Guadalupes challenged travelers with their aloof and barren heights, and the stories of gold outcroppings and lost gold mines were part of the small mining town's life. Bill Bender listened to these stories for a week, while his wife rested in the home of Tom Feeney, the local assayer, and then one day he bought a pack outfit with his meager savings and struck out into the hills.

He was gone almost two weeks. A Mexican caravan, coming up along a branch of the old Chihuahua Trail, found him just south of Turner's Creek, half starved and nearly dead of thirst. They brought him into Coldwater, and while he was recovering, his wife died in childbirth.

Bill Bender never completely recovered from his terrible ordeal or the shock of his young wife's death. But in his lucid moments he told of finding a gold bed where nuggets lay strewn over a canyon floor like gravel. He had a half-filled poke to prove it, and the nuggets assayed almost pure gold.

He never went on to California. He kept returning to the hills in vain effort to locate the canyon where the nuggets lay ready for the picking. Young Bob Bender was left on the town, to grow up as best as he could. Bill Bender grew old and withered and grizzled under the blazing sun, but strangely enough, instead of hating him, the boy became attached to the man who had abandoned him. When he was older they went out into the savage land beyond Turner's Creek together, searching, always searching for a canyon of gold. . . .

SEVENTEEN years later, on the one time young Bob did not accompany his father into the hills, Crazy Bill was murdered. Bob found him just south of Turner's Creek, almost at the spot where the Mexican travelers had found him before. Someone had shot him through the head.

Tight-lipped, young Bender brought him into Coldwater. He dug a grave beside that of his mother's on the edge of town and buried his father. All that Crazy Bill left his son was an old burro, some worn camping equipment, a miner's pick and shovel, and a gold nugget which he had saved from his first trip into the Guadalupes.

Young Bender didn't leave Coldwater. He did odd jobs for a while until he had enough to grubstake himself, and then he vanished. A month after his dad was killed he came plodding back into town, leading the dusty burro. Porch loungers turned to watch him pass down the street. "Just like his dad," they said. "Crazy Bill's boy, chasin' his paw's dream mine!"

He paid no attention to their jeers. Turning at Rawlins' Ace of Spades Bar, he tethered the weary burro at the rail.

Rawlins was dozing behind the counter when Bob Bender entered. The boy walked jauntily to the bar, thumped a heavy poke on the scarred surface and said in a clear, triumphant voice, "Reckon my paw wasn't so crazy after all. She was there, all right, like he always said. Nuggets lyin' around to be picked up. Some of 'em bigger'n this."

Saloon loungers crowded around as he took a nugget the size of his thumb from

the bulging poke and tossed it on the bar.

Rawlins clamped greedy fingers on the yellow lump and studied it carefully. The saloon owner was a hulking man with more hair on his face than on his head. He smelled of sweat and tobacco and filth. Broad suspender straps held up a pair of baggy, greasy pants. He wiped his bearded mouth with the back of a hairy hand and licked his thick lips.

"Where'd you find it, kid?"

Young Bender shook his head. "That's my secret. My paw hunted seventeen years for it, but I found it. You jaspers always laughed at him. Called him Crazy Bill." The boy was defiant. "Now you know he wasn't crazy."

He put out his hand for the nugget. Rawlins hesitated, greed glinting nakedly in his piggish eyes. Then an oily smile parted his lips. He handed it back to the boy.

"Yo're wrong there, boy. I always said Bill knew what he was talkin' about. I even staked him a few times. Remember?"

Young Bender nodded. "Sure," he said bleakly. "I remember. But I remember how you used to feed him liquor too—to see if he'd talk straighter when he was drunk. I saw you beat him up more than once, when I was a kid. You thought he'd tell you where the canyon was, didn't you? But he didn't know."

He turned and went out to the patient burro, and, untying it, they walked down the street to the assayer's office.

Tom Feeney looked up as the boy entered. He was a thin, leathery man with a perpetual hunch to his narrow shoulders. He said, "Hello, Bob. Come in an' sit down. I'm glad to see you back."

Young Bender remained standing, thinking how this kind man had patiently assayed Crazy Bill's worthless rocks through the years. It had been Feeney's generosity that had kept his father going and himself alive during the early years. He could never pay this man enough for what he had done.

Feeney removed his eyepiece and looked up at the youngster. "You've been gone a long time, Bob. I've been waiting for you to get back. It's time you quit huntin' that will-o-the-wisp canyon of yore dad's. Go to California. Yore uncle, in San Jacinto, is waitin' for you."

Bob shook his head. Some of the men from the Ace of Spades had trailed him to the assay office. He knew they were listening. The news of his find was spreading fast through Coldwater.

"I won't have to, Tom," he said quickly. "I found pop's mine. Look!" He dumped the contents of his poke down on the desk in front of the assayer.

Tom Feeney spread them out between his fingers, then looked up at Bob, surprise arching his grizzled brows. "Bob, you—"

"There's more, lots more, where those came from," Bender went on excitedly. "I ran out of grub an' water before I found the canyon, an' I couldn't stay too long. But I'm goin' back tomorrow. If you'll loan me a cayuse I can make it to Still Canyon—"

He turned swiftly, walked to the door and closed it in the face of a tobacco-chewing lounger from the Ace of Spades. The man sneered as he turned away. Through the office window Bob saw him cross the street to the Ace of Spades.

Bob Bender turned back to Tom Feeney. "I'll explain later. Let me have a cayuse an' some grub."

Feeney nodded understandingly.

BOB BENDER left town the next day riding a rawboned roan, with his father's burro trailing behind. He headed leisurely for Turner's Creek and camped that night by the last flowing water this side of the Guadalupes. Night flowed down from the hills and he sat cross-legged before the fire until the flames

barely flickered over the embers. Then he scuffed the fire out and turned in. He woke before dawn, and in moccasins he stole back along his trail. He moved lightly and swiftly, like an Apache scouting enemy territory. Two miles back from the creek the faintly acrid odor of burning wood touched his nostrils, holding him momentarily rigid. His nose gave him directions then, and he went on until in the darkness a horse lifted up its head and nickered. The sound conveyed itself to a dark lump vaguely visible against the pale ground. It stirred, and then a hulking figure sat up and a carbine glinted in the starlight.

A man's sleepy voice cursed softly, but it told young Bender what he wanted to know. He knew who the man was who was following him.

He eased back into the deeper darkness and was in his camp as dawn trickled through the black crack in the eastern sky. He rolled himself up in his blanket and fell asleep almost at once.

The sun woke him. He breakfasted on a can of peaches, then leisurely saddled the roan. He moved warily, however, once he crossed Turner's Creek. He kept looking at his back trail, like a man afraid he's being followed. He saw no one.

At Woman's Head Rock he turned sharply west into the giant folds of the Guadalupes. The sun blazed down with deadly heat. He pushed on now in a straight line, as if he had discarded the fear of pursuit. Three days later, with the sun slanting against his back, Bob Bender halted at the mouth of a narrow canyon. He dismounted, took a gunny sack and his small pick from the paraphernalia on the burro's back, and without hesitation headed into the canyon. He walked deliberately, his eyes on the ground ahead as though he were looking for something, and in five minutes the heavy shadows filling the narrow canyon hid him from sight.

Ten minutes after he had vanished Rawlins rode up beside the picketed roan and burro and dismounted. He had a carbine across his saddle front, and he let it fall into the crook of his arm as he hastily picketed his rangy dun mare.

"Thought you had shaken me, eh?" he muttered grimly. "Yore old man got wise that last time an' doubled back an' caught me. I had to kill him. But I was smarter with you."

He patted the carbine. "A bag of gold nuggets. I knew Crazy Bill wasn't mad—not that mad. I knew he'd run across that gold canyon again some day, or his boy would."

A buzzard wheeled and dipped gracefully along the canyon mouth, questing in a shallow glide over the glistening sand patches. Rawlins turned toward the canyon. He couldn't let the boy get too far ahead of him. There might be a side passage, and he didn't want to lose the kid,

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after sticking so close to him these past days.

He felt the ground shake a little as he ran heavily, and a faint prickle of warning slid across his spine. He slowed, his jaw slackening. But the stretch of sand ahead looked firm and solid.

Suddenly he was off firm ground. His running stride carried him a few lunging feet further into an expanse of sand that suddenly quivered and heaved a little. A trickle of water surfaced and caught the blood red of the setting sun.

He was in up to his knees before full realization pushed across his stupid features. *Quicksand!* Then terror raked its raw hand through his guts and he turned and tried to claw his way back to firm ground. But the sand all around had that deceiving quality and he didn't know which patch would support him and which was without bottom. With blind panic he fought the inexorably sucking sand, and his very fury only served to mire him more deeply. Out of breath, a wild-eyed animal, he rested—and the wet, deceiving sand was almost under his armpits now. He began to yell. He emptied his carbine into the air and the sharp reports bounced back from the weathered canyon walls, sending the echoes across that still and patient land.

A buzzard wheeled soundlessly overhead and dipped back, skimming low, its beady eyes riveted on the threshing man trapped in the sand.

"Bender!" the man screamed wildly. "Bender!"

A slim figure came out of the shadows of the canyon, moving sure-footedly across the treacherous sand. Young Bender knew this canyon as he knew a hundred others—as he knew the naked and savage peaks that were beginning to darken in the east. The slanting sun touched his dark, impassive features, and he was like an Apache, hard and cruel—a man formed by this pitiless country and men like Rawlins.

He squatted on his heels less than twelve feet away from the man who had murdered his father. Rawlins, only his head and arms above the sand now, was frothing at the mouth, his eyes bulging in his head. Alternately he yelled curses and pleaded for help.

There was no help. Even if young Bender wanted to he couldn't get a rope from where the horses were picketed to this man. He stared unwinkingly while the sand oozed up over Rawlins' lips, gagging his curses and stilling his threshing arms.

An eye for an eye. Rawlins had killed his father out of greed, and Bob knew dispassionately that Rawlins would just as callously have killed him tonight.

He drew his poke from his pocket as he waited, and deliberately dumped its contents into the sand. He kept one nugget in his hand—the nugget his father had retained from the treasure he had searched a lifetime to find again.

The sand swallowed the worthless rocks as it had swallowed Rawlins. He had used those rocks as gold bait, and Rawlins had fallen into the trap. . . .

Maybe these savage and lonely hills held his father's "gold canyon," or a dozen like it. But Bob Bender was no longer interested. He turned Rawlins' horse loose, after stripping saddle and gear from it. Then he mounted the rawboned roan Tom Feeney had given him and headed west for California and a new way of life. . . .

Behind him the shadows deepened and the buzzards came back, wheeling low over the spot where Rawlins had vanished. The sand shifted and heaved a little to some internal disturbance, and water oozed up slowly and vanished, and stillness came again to the canyon mouth. . . .

SECOND-STRING HEROES

THEIR SADDLES EMPTY, THEIR GUNS AND LAUGHTER STILLED, BUT THE WEST THEY BUILT LIVES ON.

by ROBBINS AND WAGGENER

GENE DELABERT

1

Gene Delabert, who during his life was known as "Red Eye" Gene and after his death was referred to as the Savior of Telapeche, was by trade a knife and scissor grinder. His small, unpainted cart, drawn by two mules, was a familiar sight on all the major trails of the Southwest from 1864 to 1880. Wherever he went in those busy and bloody days, he found plenty of demand for his skill, and his grinding wheel spun and sang from morning to night.

2

Despite the fact that business was brisk, it did not pay much, and it was his numerous attempts to augment his income by selling red-eye whiskey to the Indians that earned him his nickname and a number of terms in various local jails.

3

One day, when he was twenty-two miles outside of Telapeche, New Mexico, he spied a smoke ribbon and turned toward it, expecting to find redskins. What he stumbled on were white men, a newly formed band of outlaws, who planned not a mere robbery but the sack of the town of Telapeche. "We'll kill every damn soul, burn it to the ground!" boasted one.

4

"Red Eye" Gene whipped up his mules, but he was not quick enough to escape. The gang offered him part of the loot if he joined them. He refused. Then, deliberately, they filled him full of his own knives and left him in the desert to die. That night, Gene's wagon jolted into Telapeche and the dying driver, looking more like a porcupine than a man, whispered his words of warning. The bandit attack was repelled and many of the outlaws met death on the point of Gene Delabert's knives.

By
WAYNE D.
OVERHOLSER

STRANGERS, KEEP RIDING!

CHAPTER ONE

Heading for Redrock

BEFORE the sun was down, Grant Shannon knew, he would have to make camp. He had left the spruce and aspens above him, but the scrub oak jungles clothing the western slope of the Uncompahgre Plateau at this altitude seemed to stretch on endlessly. Somewhere ahead of him was San Miguel Park with the new town of Redrock, but it was an unknown country to him, and to try finding his way through the oak thicket at night would be both futile and wearying.

Shannon had no idea what he would find in Redrock. It was a colony town started less than a year ago, but he knew

"I should have killed you this morning, Shannon," Chilton roared, and went for his gun.

"There are three things that rot men's souls," Sam McKeever declared when he founded Redrock, "whiskey, religion and lawyerin'—and we're gonna keep 'em out!" But when all hell broke loose in McKeever's little town, where could he find three better men to side him on the red trail to Boothill — than a saloonkeeper, a parson and the fastest-shooting Blackstone man in the West?

Gripping Western Novelette

nothing about it beyond that. He wasn't sure his man would be there. He might have to keep on riding. Through Paradox valley. Over the La Sal range into Utah. Perhaps into Robbers' Roost. If that was the case, there was a better than even chance Grant Shannon would not come back.

Turning his horse from the high ridge he had been following, he rammed through the scrub oak until he reached a creek, the canyon rims high black lines on both sides of him, his thoughts as dark as the canyon bottom. He had been reading law in Judge Burney's Leadville office when he received the letter from his sister in

Cheyenne telling him how Sam McKeever had sold their father the idea of financing a farm colony that had settled here on the western slope. Nobody could change old Bill Shannon's mind once it was made up. He gave McKeever almost everything he had. Then, a few weeks later, Grant Shannon had a telegram saying his father had died from heart failure a month after McKeever had pulled out.

Shannon had gone home to attend the funeral and had stayed to get the legal tangles straightened out, all the time thinking that Sam McKeever must be a complete rat, and not understanding how his mother and sister could respect the promoter. "An idealist," they said. "If he fails it won't be from lack of honesty."

That was something Shannon could not believe. It looked like a bunco game all the way. Chances were McKeever would never see the colony again. He'd keep on going with the Shannon gold. If that was the case, it might take a lifetime to find him.

Shannon had not told his mother and sister that he intended getting the gold back. He'd started for Colorado, letting them think he was returning to Judge Burney's office in Leadville. He had packed a lot of living into his twenty-five years, years that had seen him doing a little bit of everything from riding for a Texas outfit to toting the star in Colorado mining camps. He had seen enough smooth-tongued con men work to know their methods. Sam McKeever, judging from what Shannon had heard, was no better than the others. The law books could wait. McKeever couldn't.

SHANNON would have stopped before it was completely dark if he had not seen the campfire down creek from him. He knew he was not far from San Miguel Park. This might be some of McKeever's bunch, for he had been on a well-traveled trail from the moment he'd hit the creek. He rode on cautiously, hand on gun butt, thinking that if this was McKeever or some of his colonists, it would be wiser to camp with them than away from them.

The tall man slicing bacon into a frying pan rose when he heard Shannon's horse. He turned, faded eyes staring into the gloom. Shannon, riding into the firelight, cried out in surprise, "Molin, what are you doing here?"

The tall man straightened and smiled. Running a hand through his white hair, he said in a gentle voice, "I might ask the same, Grant. Get down. Supper's ready. Rocky's out fishing, but he should be back."

"Rocky?"

"Rocky Trent. You know him, don't you?"

"Sure. Anybody who's been in Leadville knows Rocky Trent." Shannon stepped down. "What's happened to you, John? A preacher traveling with a saloon keeper doesn't make sense."

Molin moved the coffee pot back from the fire. He was an old man who had given his life to preaching the gospel in mining camps tucked high up in the tiny valleys of the Rockies. He was a familiar figure to prospectors and isolated miners, climbing above timberline in the dead of winter and sliding back down the steep slopes on his long Norwegian snowshoes. Despite his age, no storm had ever been fierce enough to keep him from a home or camp where he was needed.

"Why, nothing's happened to me." Molin's smile faded as he kicked a burning twig back into the fire. "Leadville needed a younger man and got one. I heard about this colony that's settling in San Miguel Park and I thought it needed a preacher."

"McKeever's bunch?" When Molin nodded, Shannon asked, "Ever see McKeever?"

"No. I've just heard about him."

"What have you heard?"

"That he's an idealist who believes in neither God nor devil. A man like that is always a challenge, Grant. I guess that's the real reason I'm here."

"Yeah, he'd be a challenge all right."

Rocky Trent came up the creek, calling, "Well, damn me, it looks like Grant Shannon, but I guess it ain't. It's what I get for drinking creek water. You're to blame, Parson."

"First time you've been sober since the Civil War, isn't it, Rocky?" Shannon asked.

"Hell, no." Trent dropped his trout into the frying pan and held out his hand. "I just sell the stuff. How are you, boy?"

"Fine as silk." Shannon had always liked Trent, a bulky, big-fisted man with a pair of twinkling hazel eyes and a nose that had been spread over much of his scarred face. He gripped Trent's hand, asking, "What brings you here?"

"The parson thinks McKeever's colonists need preaching to," Trent said. "I think they need good liquor, and you figger they need a lawyer."

Shannon grinned. "I'd say they needed legal advice more than they need your whiskey, Rocky. They run you out of Leadville?"

Trent shook his big head. "I sold out. That camp's seen its best days. New country out here. Cattle country. If McKeever's outfit don't make the grade, someone else will. I aim to get in on the ground floor."

LATER, when they were eating, John Molin asked, "You know we'll have trouble, don't you, Grant?"

"I expect trouble, but I don't know why you would."

"We'll all have it. McKeever's got a notion that the evil in life comes from churches, law and liquor. We're the representatives of the three things he hates."

Trent laughed. "Wonder if he's got a jail to throw us into?"

"It's my guess he has," Molin answered. "I talked to some men in Montrose who had visited with the colonists when they went through last fall. Honest, hard-working people, they said. Perhaps McKeever is too, but he thinks like a crazy man. Why would honest folks throw in with him?"

"Ain't no crazier'n a man buying a salted mine or a gold brick or betting on a shell game," Trent grunted. "Crazy people in a crazy world."

Leaning back, Shannon twisted a smoke. "He's smooth. That's the answer." He told them what his father had done, adding bitterly, "Now Sis and Mom don't have enough to live on."

"You figger on getting your dad's dinero back?" Trent asked.

Shannon nodded. "If McKeever's there. If he isn't, I'll have a tough time finding him."

"He'll be there," Trent said. "That colony's his sucker bait. He won't let anyone else have it."

Molin poured another cup of coffee, eyes probing Shannon. He was never one to condemn another, but now he was troubled. He said mildly, "A man has to do what he thinks is right, Grant. There is one thing, though, that you should remember. I never knew your father, but he must have done what he thought was right."

"Sure," Shannon agreed, "and if you asked Mom and Sis, they'd say he did right. They'd have a fit if they knew what I'm figuring on, but that doesn't make it right for McKeever to talk a sick old man out of his money."

"I think it would be wise if you'd take your time," Molin said.

"I'll take my time all right. I want to see what makes this McKeever work like he does, but taking my time won't change anything."

"You'd be smart to forget the whole business," Trent warned. "All you'll do

will be to make an outlaw out of yourself."

"I'll forget it when I'm convinced McKeever is an hon—"

A rifle cracked from the darkness across the creek. The bullet drilled a hole through the coffee pot, the coffee pouring out to sizzle in the fire. "Don't move," a woman cried before the echoes of the rifle report had died, "or the next shot will be different. Get their guns, Brick."

Shannon had never been caught flat-footed before in his life. If he had considered this outlaw country he wouldn't have been caught now. His first instinctive action was to roll out of the firelight. A second bullet, lifting a geyser of dirt a foot from his head, stopped that action. The girl shouted, "I warned you, Shannon. You'll get the next one through your skull."

So she knew his name! He lay there, swearing impotently, while a burly, red-haired man came out of the darkness, pulled Shannon's gun, took Trent's and checked Molin. Stepping back, he called, "All right, Ruth."

The redhead was a tough, Shannon saw, with sly green eyes, a great beak of a nose, and an irregular strawberry splotch on his left cheek that added to his ugliness. He held a cocked gun on Shannon, face mirroring the pressing wickedness that was in him. Shannon had seen too many men like him, filled with volcanic restlessness, contemptuous of anyone weaker than themselves, ruled by bitter, pressing passions. In this moment a warning born of years of living in a lawless land washed through Shannon. Here was a man who could never be trusted.

The redhead decided Shannon was the man to watch. Trent, seeing this, had wormed his way toward the fire and was reaching for a pine limb, one end bright with flame, when the girl said, "Don't try it, friend." She rode into the circle of fire light, a Winchester held across her saddle horn.

The girl reined up, eyes touching Molin, who sat motionless on the other side of the fire, then Trent, who lay propped up on an arm, his trouble-scarred face bitter with frustration. She brought her gaze on to Shannon who had come to his feet, a lanky, whip-muscled man who looked more like a cowhand than a law student.

Suddenly the girl laughed as if these three presented a grim joke. She said, "A preacher, a saloon keeper and a lawyer. Now that's the kind of a catch I never expected to make."

SHE WAS a small girl, not over five feet tall, about twenty, Shannon guessed, and under other circumstances he would have found her pretty. Her hair was curly and so black that it glistened in the fire light, her eyes were bright blue and held an eagerness he had never seen before in a woman's eyes. She was looking, he thought, for something she had not found.

"A rare catch," John Molin said in his restrained voice, "but I think an impartial observer would not call it any more unusual than our captor."

Her gaze flicked to the preacher. "There's nothing unusual about me."

Shannon laughed. "You ought to look at yourself, ma'am. I've run into some different kinds of hardcases, but I never was held up by a pretty girl before. If you want our money, you've made a bad guess."

She whirled on him, suddenly angry. "I don't want your money. We're taking you into Redrock because you're trespassing on colony land. Don't tell me you didn't know."

"I'm afraid I'll have to tell you that," Shannon said. "I was headed for Redrock, but I didn't know I'd hit colony land yet. Why don't you put up some signs?"

"We did," the girl flashed scornfully. "You're a liar as well as a thief."

"She's right, Grant," Molin said. "Rocky and I passed the signs several miles up the creek."

"A preacher who tells the truth," the girl said. She motioned to the redhead. "Get their horses, Brick. No use wasting time talking."

"What are you going to do with us?" Molin asked.

"Afraid?" the girl jeered.

The preacher smiled. "No. Just curious."

"Maybe you'd better be afraid. The Redrock colony is making an experiment in human relationships that has never been tried before. There's one thing you can count on. We won't stand for preachers, lawyers and saloon keepers making a failure out of our project."

Shannon motioned toward the redhead. "What's that hardcase doing in a high and mighty organization like yours?"

"He's a good man," she said hotly. "His name's Brick Yoe and just because he's been an outlaw is no proof he is now. The right kind of association and example will change him."

Shannon threw up his hands. "Well, I guess I've seen it all now. When anybody changes that kind, it'll be a miracle, and it'll take more than example and association to do it."

"That's right," John Molin said soberly. "I'm afraid Sam McKeever has put his faith in the wrong thing."

"You'll get a chance to tell that to Sam McKeever," she flung at them defiantly.

"How come you're tied up with this locoed outfit?" Shannon asked.

The girl trembled, the wildness of her rage making her lips quiver, but she held her silence until she could speak evenly. She said then, "Maybe you call that a compliment, Grant Shannon, but I don't take it as one. This outfit is not locoed. It's the finest thing that has ever been tried."

Shannon shrugged, not wanting to argue the point with her. "McKeever has a way of making folks think that, which doesn't keep his hair-brained scheme from being locoed. Some day you'll see that, but right now I'm asking how you come to get hooked up with McKeever."

"It happened a long time ago," she said. "I'm his daughter."

CHAPTER TWO

Chest of Gold

IT WAS a two-hour ride to Redrock. Ruth McKeever took the lead, the three prisoners in the middle, Brick Yoe in the rear. They followed the creek to the river, splashed across it and took a twisting trail up the canyon wall. They stopped to blow their horses, and Ruth, turning in her saddle, said, "This is the park, Shannon. My father used his fortune to buy it from Bart Chilton. Your father's money will see us through until we're able to make our own way."

A half-moon showed over the San Juan range far to the east, and stars were bright twinkling dots in an unstained sky. Miles ahead across the almost level park the lamps of Redrock were inviting points of light in a vast emptiness. Dust stirred by the horses' feet rose and hung motionless in the still night air; behind them was the timber and the great bulk of the plateau.

A new country, Rocky Trent had said. If this colony didn't make it, other men would. Shannon, soured by the bitterness of this thing, mentally cursed Sam McKeever. The man, he thought now, was not a thief as he had guessed. Instead he was a fanatic, able to hypnotize his own daughter with his promises, intent on wasting Shannon gold on his fantastic enterprise.

"All right," Ruth said. It's time to go. Let's ride."

They strung out across the park, darkness pressing them. Night wind, chilled by the La Sals to the west, touched them. There was the smell of dust and sage and distant timber; there was the sound of a coyote's call that seemed symbolic of the wildness of this land. The unreality of night was all around them, shading and distorting, and that too seemed symbolic of this crazy visionary man Shannon had not yet seen.

They reached the town before it was midnight. There was a single street, log cabins hard against it, four larger buildings marking the center where a short side street formed an intersection.

"Get down," Ruth said, reining up. "Brick will put away your horses."

"The hell he will!" Rocky Trent burst out.

Brick Yoe hit him on the side of the head, tumbling him out of his saddle into the street dust. Ruth cried, "No trouble, Shannon."

John Molin dismounted and helped the dazed Trent to his feet. He said, "Take it easy, Rocky."

A door was slammed open. A man called, "Who is it?"

"Me," Ruth answered. "We've got Grant Shannon and a couple more that you'll want to talk to."

"Come in." The tone was level, friendly.

Shannon stepped down, not understanding, and moved into the building. Molin and Trent followed, Trent rubbing his jaw, anger and bruised pride making his temper raw.

"Sit down," the man said. "Put up your rifle, Ruth. We've been looking for you, Grant. That's why we have been guarding the trails."

Shannon did not take the proffered chair. "Are you Sam McKeever?"

The man nodded, smiling. "I'm McKeever. You resemble your father, Grant. He was very proud of you. I suppose you knew that." McKeever watched Shannon.

Shannon took a long breath. This was not the Sam McKeever he had expected to see. The man was small, not much taller than Ruth, and frail of body. His eyes, like Ruth's, were blue. His face was thin, almost pinched, and there was a yellow, sickly pallor to his skin. His black hair was streaked with white. But those were the superficial things that eyes could see.

Shannon felt something else in him that was hard to put into words, perhaps a saintliness, a purity and unselfishness of spirit that set him apart from other men. It was this intangible quality, Shannon knew, that had convinced his father of Sam McKeever's earnest intent. It had convinced his mother and sister; it had convinced the people who made up the colony. Shannon, turning his eyes to John Molin, saw that the preacher sensed the same element in this strange man that he did.

For weeks Shannon had mentally pictured the man who bore the name Sam McKeever, and he had hated the man he had pictured. Now he knew with a trace of shame that he could not hate McKeever. He said, "I've been away from home for a long time."

McKEEVER looked at his watch. "It's late. Show these men to their quarters, Ruth. Tomorrow will be time to talk. I want you to see what we've done with Shannon money, Grant, and you'll want to meet Bart Chilton, the man I bought the park from." He looked at Trent and Molin, stroking his chin thoughtfully. "I presume you men will want to ride on in the morning."

"I'm staying," John Molin said. "A man can't go on and leave a piece of work he has not even started."

"Molin's a preacher," Ruth cried. She motioned toward Trent. "And Trent's a saloon keeper."

McKeever dropped into his chair as if very tired, his thin face showing disapproval. "We'll talk in the morning."

Ruth picked up her Winchester. "The building across the street." When they were outside, she said, "Father trusts men. I don't. Brick Yoe will stand guard and he'll shoot the first one of you who steps outside before he's told to."

"Funny thing," Shannon murmured. "I came here hating your father, but now that I've seen him, I don't hate him."

"Everybody's that way," she said, "but I still don't trust you."

"How did you know my name?"

"I listened to your talk until I couldn't stand it any longer." They were across the street then, and she opened the door of the building she had indicated. "Light a match. You'll find a lamp on the table."

Trent obeyed. Shannon, standing in the doorway, looked down at the girl, smiling a little. She was pretty, she was desirable—and she was as deadly as a mountain lion. He said, "I have a feeling your father wouldn't hurt anyone, but I can't say that about you."

"You're right," she said bitterly. "Father would show you where the gold is and trust you not to take it. I don't have that kind of faith in a man who refuses to accept his father's decision." She patted the stock of her Winchester. "We don't all live on the high level father does. I'm practical enough to see that."

"How did your dad know I was coming?"

"Your mother wrote that you were very bitter about your father's bequest. Knowing the kind of man you are, we made a guess that proved right."

"What kind of a man am I?"

He waited for her answer, surprised at the tension that was suddenly in him. He wanted her good opinion, a desire so unexplainable it was fantastic. His gray eyes met her blue ones, and he saw the indecision that was keeping her silent.

"I'm not sure," she said at last. "I thought I'd hate you, but I don't. I've been taught to hate violence, and you're a man of violence."

"He's a lawyer, Ruth," Molin said gently.

"And a lawyer is a vulture living off the miseries and disputes of other men. Before that he was a lawman with a reputation as a deadly gunman." She shook her head. "You claim to be a preacher. How can you forgive the things he has done?"

"It is not my place to condemn or forgive. There is room for good lawyers in this country and honest lawmen are as necessary as food and water." He made a swift motion of a gnarled hand as if waving the thought away. "You're overlooking the most important point in all of this, Ruth. We must search for the possibilities of good that are in a man. There are many possibilities in Grant Shannon."

She held her silence for a time, thinking of this. Then, as if her thoughts had reached a wall they could not pierce, she said, "Your beds are made. I hope you'll be comfortable." She went out, locking the door behind her.

Rocky Trent jerked up a chair and, stepping on it, tried the stout pine limbs that barred the windows. "Damn her," he choked. "Damn their smooth, oily tongues. If I get my hands on a gun . . ."

"Looks like we'll be here for a while," Shannon said. "Might as well go to bed."

"They didn't ask you to come, Rocky," Molin reminded Trent. "I've seen what liquor does to men."

Trent jumped down and kicked the chair into a corner, the fierceness of his anger bringing him close to madness. "Everybody needs good whiskey," he choked. "They didn't ask you to come, neither."

"That's right," Molin agreed, "and I'll take my medicine."

"So will I," Shannon said. "Maybe I've been wrong."

"A purty face," Trent flung at them. "She'll drill you through the brisket the first quick move you make."

"I think she would," Shannon said. "What do you make of it, John?"

Molin sat down on a bunk and began pulling off his boots. "He's a good man possessed of the ability to make people trust him. He's just got his faith set on the wrong thing."

"You think you can change him?"

"I can't, but the Lord can," Molin answered. "He needs men like Sam McKeever."

Afterwards, with the light out and Molin and Trent snoring, Shannon thought about what the preacher had said. He thought about his father who had always been a restless man with a gift for making money, but with an emptiness in his heart that had made him continually search for something he could not find. Shannon's mother said he had found it that last month after he had given McKeever his money. He had spent each day before his death sitting on his front porch, his eyes on the western horizon, content for the first time in his life.

That in itself had been a miracle. Old Bill Shannon had come to the end of a turbulent life, and he had found satisfaction in doing what he thought was a worthwhile thing. Sam McKeever was satisfied with himself and with his life, but Ruth was not. If her father had found the secret of happiness, why had he been unable to give it to her? When at last Grant Shannon dropped into a troubled sleep, John Molin's words were beating a chorus in his ears, "We must look for the possibilities of good that are in a man." McKeever had much that was good.

IT WAS broad daylight when Brick Yoe pounded on the door, bawling, "Breakfast. Get to hell out of bed!"

Rocky Trent was still grumbling when they stepped into the street. Yoe, gun in hand, growled, "I didn't get no sleep on account of you. I ain't built like old man McKeever. I'd just as soon plug you as not." Trent looked at his surly face and became silent.

Shannon took a deep breath, gaze sweeping the street. The buildings were log, most of them small, one-room cabins. The four larger buildings at the corner were marked hotel, livery stable, store and office. Shannon and his friends had slept in the hotel, and the building in which they had talked to McKeever the night before was the office.

It was a beautiful park, surrounded by a rugged, broken country clothed with piñons and cedars. Shannon could see the La Sal Mountains to the west rearing their massive bulk upward along the Colorado-Utah line. Eastward was a single perfectly shaped peak that Yoe grudgingly told them was Lone Cone. Farther east and stretching to the north was the serrated San Juan range.

Sam McKeever, standing in his office doorway, asked pleasantly, "Did you ever see a more beautiful place, gentlemen?"

"No," Molin agreed, and Shannon nodded, but Trent maintained his sullen silence.

McKeever motioned them on through his office into a long dining room where a table was set for breakfast. Ruth was pouring coffee when they came in. She said in a cool voice, "Good-morning," and finished with the coffee.

A man stood with his back to the fireplace. Motioning to him, McKeever said, "Gentlemen, this is Bart Chilton, who sold the park to us. Bart, meet Grant Shannon, John Molin and Rocky Trent."

Shannon shook hands, thinking he had seen the man before. Chilton was slender and black-haired, with long fingers and a swarthy face and piercing dark eyes that mirrored none of his inner feelings.

He said, "Glad to know you, Shannon." He turned his eyes to Molin and stiffened. "McKeever, I thought preachers were forbidden."

"You know him?" McKeever asked.

"We've met," Molin said evenly. "I'm afraid you will not be influenced by what I say, but it is my duty to warn you that this man is not to be trusted."

Then Shannon remembered. "I knew I'd seen him. He was operating a shell game in a camp north of Gunnison when I was toting a star there."

"That's so," Chilton admitted, "but I'm a changed man."

"I know," McKeever nodded gravely. "He has joined our colony."

"What changed you, Chilton?" Molin asked.

The dark man motioned toward McKeever. "He changes everybody he meets."

Trent laughed. "He ain't changed me, friend. I aim to have a saloon here, McKeever, and I'll pay anything reasonable for a license."

"I suppose you want a license to start a church," McKeever flung at Molin.

The preacher shook his head. "Just your permission to preach."

"Try it and I'll throw you into jail," McKeever said hotly.

"You'll be breaking the law," Molin murmured.

"I'm the law here," McKeever said. "I understand the weakness of man and why he is evil. When there is temptation there is sin. Whiskey is a temptation. Churches with their canting hypocrisy are another. Law, as we know it, is a third. I will have none of those things here. We will have happiness in the colony because I have removed the temptations."

"You make it sound simple," Shannon said.

"It is simple if men have faith in themselves and a desire to change." He touched his chest with the tips of his fingers. "I give them an example."

"The coffee's cold," Ruth said.

"I'm sorry," McKeever said contritely. "Let's sit down."

It was a good meal: fried potatoes, bacon, scrambled eggs and biscuits. Ruth took no part in the talk, but she was on hand to fill coffee cups and pass the platters when plates were empty. McKeever did most of the talking, rambling on about the beauty of the country and the undeveloped wealth that was there for the taking.

SHANNON covertly studied Chilton, trying to guess what the bunco artist's game was, but there seemed to be no explanation for his presence in McKeever's home. Shannon gave it up, certain of only one thing. McKeever's influence was not enough to change a man like Bart Chilton.

When breakfast was finished and McKeever had led the others into his office, Shannon stayed behind. He said, "Thanks for the meal."

She began stacking dishes, "You're welcome, Grant. We hope you'll stay and become one of us."

There was none of the belligerence in her that had characterized her the night before. He said, "You've changed."

She raised her eyes to his. "No. I was just carrying out orders last night."

For the first time, Shannon understood. She was giving her father all the help she could, hoping he would succeed, but he sensed that under the bold front she had shown the evening before, she masked the doubts that were in her.

"You think this is as crazy as I do," Shannon said.

"No, but there are some things I don't understand. His faith in you, for instance."

"Me?" He stared at her, puzzled.

"I'd run you off colony land today if I had the authority, but Father says he doesn't want Shannon money unless

you're satisfied with the way it's being spent."

"Then he can give it back, because I'm not satisfied."

She came toward him, lips tightly pressed, a brittle sharpness in her eyes. "I have never killed a man, Grant Shannon, but I'll kill you if you interfere. Father may fail, but I'll see to it that he has every chance to succeed."

He took a long breath. She would do exactly what she said. Her love for her father was that kind of love. He said, "I envy the man you will marry," and left the room.

McKeever smiled when Shannon, Trent and Molin came into the office. "I want you to see the ditch and flume we're building, Grant. Then you'll understand the magnitude of this thing we're doing."

McKeever stepped to a heavy chest that stood against the wall. Removing a Navajo blanket, he lifted the lid and motioned for Shannon to look inside. Shannon whistled when he saw what was there. Gold! Ten and twenty-dollar pieces. More gold than he had ever seen before in his life.

McKeever laughed softly. "Surprised, aren't you, Grant? There is the money your father gave me. You say it is foolish to keep it this way." He shook his head. "Not at all. It is an example of faith in the colonists, something they all understand. They know it's here, but no one has tried to steal it."

"I might," Shannon said.

"No. I trust you and trust returns trust. We need that money to buy equipment, stock, and grain. Before I'm done, Grant, you will agree that we are doing a tremendous job here. We are giving a home to farmers who have lost everything in the Middle West to drouth and grasshoppers."

Crossing the room to his desk, McKeever opened a drawer and took out Shannon's gun. "Wear this, Grant. You can see now how much I trust you."

"How about *my* gun?" Trent bawled.

"You have no reason to stay here," McKeever said mildly. "You'll be given your gun when you're ready to leave."

"Oh, hell," Trent said in disgust. "You can't keep me from having a saloon outside your borders. If I know men, they'll beat a path to my door."

McKeever rose. "I don't believe in violence, my friend, but there are times when it is necessary. Ruth, let Anna do the dishes. You will ride with us." He nodded at Chilton. "Want to come, Bart?"

"I found a mistake in the books, Sam. I'd better work today."

"Let your conscience guide you," McKeever said, and turned to the door.

"You letting this crook stay here alone with that dinero?" Trent demanded.

"Bart is our bookkeeper," McKeever said reprovingly. "Come on."

Shannon lingered after the others had gone. "You sure as hell don't fool me, Chilton. If you clean out that chest, I'll trail you to hell. That's a promise."

Chilton's black eyes mocked him. "I have bigger fish to fry, friend, but I'll tell you one thing. You and your pards had better be out of here by sundown, or I'll drill all three of you."

Shannon, staring at him, sensed the murderous intent in the man. He asked, "Why?"

"I'm playing for high stakes, Shannon. I don't aim to let you and the preacher bust up my game."

"You scare me," Shannon said lightly, and swung out of the room.

CHAPTER THREE

Bullets Buy a Town

THEY took a westward course out of Redrock and made a slow swing around the edge of the park, McKeever

talking at length about the ten thousand acres that would be under the ditch, the fine summer range in the plateau, the minerals that were there to be mined.

Before noon they came down a cedar-covered slope to the river. McKeever pointed to the flume that crossed the stream, the timber still yellow with newness. "We cross the river at this point, Grant. We have put in a small dam upstream, and this end of the ditch is done. Within a month we shall begin moving dirt on the park."

McKeever turned downstream. "We have a mile of flume here, then a tunnel through a ridge that is not yet finished, and from there on it will be an easy task."

They followed a road along the river for a time, no one speaking until McKeever reined up. He motioned for the others to do the same. He sat his saddle, head cocked as if listening. Then Shannon heard it, a ribald song sung by a dozen men in the way drunk men sing.

McKeever dug steel into his horse and went down the road in a wild run. Ruth called, "Father," and started after him.

Trent laughed sourly. "So the old boy don't want liquor sold in his damned colony."

"Stay out of this, Rocky," Molin ordered. "There may be more to this than we can see."

"I'm guessing it's the handsome face of our friend Chilton," Shannon said. "Let's get along. McKeever may need a hand."

Molin hesitated. "Let him work his theories out, Grant."

But Shannon didn't wait. Reluctantly the preacher and Trent followed. There were about a dozen men at the mouth of the tunnel, Shannon saw, and none were working. They all had bottles, but some were not drinking. Shannon, reining up, ran his eyes over the knot of workers and judged that at least five were too drunk to work any more that day.

McKeever was on his feet shaking one of the men, his face sickly gray. He kept shouting, "Where did you get it? Where did you get it?"

Instead of answering, the colonist shoved a half-filled bottle at McKeever, saying, "Have a drink, Sham?"

A thin man took off his battered hat. "I'm sorry, Miss Ruth, but if any of us told you where we got it, we'd get hurt."

Shannon swung down and moved to where McKeever stood shaking the drunk. "That's no good, Mr. McKeever. I'll show you what to do."

"Stay out of it, Grant," Molin called.

Ignoring the preacher, Shannon picked up the drunk and with one hand on his collar and the other gripping the seat of his pants, he walked the man to the river and shoved him in.

"You'll drown him," a big man bawled, and charged out of the tunnel mouth toward Shannon. "I'll shove you into the drink and see how you like it."

"Stop it, Stacey," McKeever shouted.

But the thing that stopped Stacey was Shannon's fist, not McKeever's order. Shannon caught him squarely on the wide point of his chin and knocked him flat on his back into the rocks at the edge of the river. He pulled his gun and eared back the hammer. "Stacey, make a wrong move and I'll let you have it in the brisket. Get over there."

"Riggs is drowning," Ruth screamed.

"I'll get him," Shannon said coldly. "Where's your Winchester?"

Ruth pulled it from the scabbard. "Stand still, Stacey. Get Riggs, Grant. I'll hold them off your back."

The river was deep and muddy at this point, and if Riggs had ever been a swimmer he was too drunk to be one now. He was beating the water into a brown froth when Shannon pulled him out. Turning him on his belly, Shannon began pounding his back. He said, "Mister, you aren't bad off this time, but if I throw you in

again, you'll be down there with the fish."

"Friend," Stacey called, "I'll get you for this."

"Shut up, or I'll let you get me now." He shook Riggs. "Who gave that belly wash to you?"

Riggs spluttered and choked and finally managed, "Stacey."

Shannon rose. "What's your part in this, Stacey?"

Stacey rubbed his cheek, muddy eyes turning to the trembling McKeever. He was a hardcase, Shannon guessed, the same caliber as Brick Yoe. He seemed uncertain what to say, his gaze coming back to Shannon.

"All right," Stacey said at last. "The boss there laid down a crazy law that there wasn't to be no liquor in the colony. We was all getting mighty run-down without it, so the last time I brought in a load of grain I fetched along a few bottles."

"Who paid you?" Shannon demanded.

"Nobody," Stacey answered sullenly.

"Was it you, Trent?" McKeever twisted in the saddle to glare at the saloonman.

"No," Trent flung back. "I didn't have anything to do with it."

"Did you ever think, McKeever," Molin broke in, "that perhaps someone else doesn't want this ditch built?"

McKeever turned to face the men at the tunnel portal. "Abel, pick up the bottles and break them." When the thin man had obeyed, McKeever ordered, "Now get on with the work. There are cattlemen around here who hate us and what we're doing. Stacey may have been hired to do this. The only way we can beat them is to move all the dirt we can by winter. Stacey, get on your horse. We'll try you tonight."

THEY climbed out of the canyon and headed across the flat to Redrock, Stacey seemingly the least worried of all the men in the party. Noting it, Shannon asked McKeever, "What steps can you take against Stacey?"

"He will be tried by a jury of colonists," McKeever said. "If he's convicted, I'll sentence him to a year in our jail."

Stacey turned in the saddle, insolent mouth pulled tightly against yellow teeth. "You'll play hell keeping me in your jug, McKeever."

"Read the constitution again," McKeever said. "You agreed to such punishment if you broke our laws."

"Sure, I know what I signed. Likewise I know what you can do." Stacey motioned toward Shannon. "If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't even be here."

"Who put you up to that whiskey business?" Shannon asked.

Stacey scowled. "Nobody. I told you that."

"How about Chilton?" Shannon pressed.

"You have no right to bring him into this," McKeever said stiffly. "Take your father's money and leave if you feel that way, but don't accuse an innocent man of wrongdoing."

"He isn't taking the money," Ruth said.

Shannon turned his eyes to the girl's white face. He guessed that Stacey's act was the first time one of the colonists had directly defied McKeever, and he sensed how it had hurt him. "All right, Ruth," Shannon said. "I'll be around."

"If you join the colony," McKeever cried, "you'll be under my direction the same as the others."

Shannon let it go without argument. They rode in silence until they reached Redrock.

"We'll have something to eat," McKeever said. Reining up at the intersection, he called, "Brick. I have a prisoner for you."

Yoe came out of the hotel, rubbing his

eyes as if he had been asleep. He saw Stacey, and grunted, "Get down."

Grinning, Stacey obeyed and walked inside. Yoe locked the door behind him.

"Brick will take care of the horses," McKeever said.

Shannon followed McKeever into the office, tension building in him. McKeever, blind in his faith, would not understand, but Grant Shannon knew what could be expected from men like Bert Chilton and Stacey and Brick Yoe. The gold in the chest would be temptation enough, but there was a bigger payoff ahead, or these men would not have held back this long. When Shannon reached the office he saw that Chilton was not there. He asked, "Where's Chilton?"

"I don't know." McKeever dropped wearily into a chair. "Get something on the table, Ruth."

"Wait a minute." Shannon stood against the wall, lean body slack, eyes probing McKeever. "It's time we got down to realities, McKeever."

McKeever's small hands clenched. "There is nothing more real—"

"I think your enemies are ready for a showdown. If they are, the money's gone."

"You can't destroy my faith in myself or my people," McKeever cried.

"You're bound to fail unless you base your faith on something besides yourself," Molin broke in.

McKeever rubbed his face, a tired, sick old man. "Let me alone. I told you all the evil in the world comes from—"

the evil there is in the world comes from—"

sharply. "I was forced to change my mind after I saw you. I thought you were a crook who robbed my father. Now I know better. I'd like to help you make this thing go because Dad wanted it to succeed."

"Get something to eat, Ruth," McKeever said.

"No, Father. It's time you were listening."

Shannon had not expected that from Ruth, but it was help he could not afford to ignore. He hurried on, "From the time Ruth moved in on us last night, I've heard a lot of fine talk about how the right kind of association will change men like Chilton, but it's like John Molin says, McKeever. You've put your faith on the wrong thing. I tell you the chest is empty."

"All right, Grant," McKeever said heavily. "Lift the lid, Ruth."

"Get Chilton first," Shannon said.

McKeever nodded at Ruth. "Look in his room."

Ruth disappeared and a moment later returned with Chilton. He wore his gun, and his dark eyes, pinned on Shannon's face, were brittle with hatred. He asked coldly, "What is it, Sam?"

"Lift the lid, Ruth," Shannon ordered.

CHILTON came closer, lips tightening. "You've taken a long time to build something, Sam. Don't destroy it."

"I'm not destroying anything," McKeever said. "It takes hard facts to show a stubborn man his error. Lift the lid, Ruth."

Chilton gripped the girl's arm. "Don't do it, Sam," he cried, his voice filled with grim urgency. "The gold was here this morning. We all saw it."

"That's why we're looking now," Shannon flung at him. "You were alone. It's my guess you cleaned it out. You put Stacey up to what he did. Why, Chilton? Who's paying you to smash the colony?"

"Nobody. I didn't put Stacey up to bringing the whisk—"

Chilton stopped, knowing he had given himself away, for he had had no way of knowing what had happened at the tunnel.

McKeever flinched, eyes mirroring the hurt that was in him. "So you've been lying, Bart."

"I should have killed you this morning, Shannon," Chilton roared, and went for his gun.

Shannon matched the con man's draw, flame licking out of the muzzle of his gun ahead of Chilton's. The room trembled with the violence of the explosions. Powdersmoke made a stench in the room. Chilton walked into it, his gun dropping to the floor, one hand clutching his shirt. Then he fell, arms flung out in front of him.

Molin knelt beside him. Chilton, the knowledge of death in him, was suddenly afraid. He breathed, "Yoe's got the gold. It's in the hotel. The cowmen paid me to bust the colony. Shannon's coming pushed me . . . into . . . robbing . . . the . . . chest. If McKeever didn't find . . . it . . . for a while . . . he'd have blamed . . . Shannon."

Bart Chilton died then. Sam McKeever, standing over him, looked down at the swarthy face as if he could not believe what he had heard. Shannon lifted the chest lid and looked down inside. He said, "Empty."

McKeever reeled toward the door. Trent called, "Don't go out there. They'll drill you."

McKeever didn't stop. Shannon grabbed for him, but McKeever shook him off.

"Let him go," Ruth breathed. "He's got to find out for himself. He'll never be sure if he doesn't."

"He's making a target as big as a house," Shannon urged. "They'll get him sure."

"Ruth's right," Molin said. "He's got to get to the bottom before he can get to the top."

Shannon, gun in hand, wheeled out of the room behind McKeever. The hotel door was open. Stacey and Yoe, both armed, broke out of it just as Shannon reached the street.

"Chilton is dead," McKeever called shrilly. "He said you had the gold. He lied, didn't he?"

Shannon, knowing that McKeever's words set it off, raised his gun, but he was too late. Brick Yoe shot McKeever down with as little compunction as he would shoot a passing dog. Shannon's shot roared into the echoes of Yoe's. The redhead stumbled and fell as Shannon fired again. Stacey had time for one shot, but he hurried it and missed. Then Shannon dropped hammer a second time, and the town was alive with the gun echoes that rolled along the street. Stacey lurched with the hammering impact of Shannon's slug; he broke at knee and waist and, falling, died with his face in the dust of the street.

They knelt beside McKeever, Ruth crying a little, and Molin saying, "You're all right. You won't die. We'll get you through."

There was a strange look in McKeever's eyes, the look of a man who has seen over the horizon into eternity. He breathed, "You were right, Molin. I had my faith in the wrong things." He reached for Shannon's hand. "Stay with us, Grant. We need you to pull us through this, now."

John Molin had been right, too, when he had said McKeever was a man who had to go to the bottom before he could get to the top. People would still follow him, have faith in him, but the miracle was that Sam McKeever now would have faith in a power that was far greater than he was, himself.

Shannon glanced at Ruth; he saw the eagerness in her eyes, the flare of hope in her face. He sensed that her father could not give happiness to her, that she had to find it in her own way, and it was then he knew that he was the one man who could help her find it. He said, "I'll stay, Sam."

THE END

Journada of Hate

By BUD SWANSON

Savage creatures of the wild stalked and fought him; hunger and thirst tore at his guts; redskins sent deadly showers of arrows at him. Yet, as long as breath was in him, Hugh Glass would continue his trek to Fort Atkinson—to exact his dead man's vengeance!

Before he could get his gun into firing position, the grizzly knocked him down with a mighty sweep of its paw.

Factual Drama of the Old West

IN 1823 the West was filled with stories about a mysterious and fabled region called Yellowstone Valley. Trappers and scouts and fur traders returned to St. Louis with tall tales about a wild country that spouted hot water, and where the earth rumbled and boiled beneath their feet. Few had actually seen the legendary valley, but all of them could describe it.

Young Hugh Glass listened intently to a version an old-time plainsman was telling. The old-timer was a veteran in the art of yarn-spinning, and he told his story with all the gusto and romanticism his colorful imagination could impart.

"I swear," he proclaimed, "I ain't seed

nothin' like it before under God's great sun. A green empire of trees holdin' up the sky. Canyons. Waterfalls. Roarin' rivers. An' boilin' water hissin' an' shootin' a thousand feet in the air—maybe more. An' then, I swear, the whole bloomin' world comes to an end—the ground earthquakin' and tremblin' under your boots."

When he was through talking, his eyes swept the smoky St. Louis saloon for unbelieving faces, but he found none. Hugh Glass made his way beside the old storyteller at the bar.

"I'd like to go there," he said earnestly.

The old man was pleased that he had told his story so effectively, and he placed a friendly arm around the young man's shoulders.

"That's easy," said he. "There's a party settin' out in a day or two, I hear. Feller by the name o' Andrew Henry is headin' 'er."

Hugh Glass sought out Andrew Henry, the leader of the expedition, and asked if he might join the party.

"Be glad to have you," said Henry. "I need more men. Can't say when we'll get back, though."

Glass smiled. "I'm in no hurry. I just want to see this place with my own eyes."

"You'll probably see more'n you've bargained for," Henry ventured.

Several days later the expedition started out in early morning up the Missouri River. The country was primitive and rugged. Hugh Glass walked well ahead of the main party, looking for game.

IT WAS on the vanguard of one of these missions that Glass approached a clump of saplings and heard a low growl, followed by a scuffling movement within. He jerked his musket forward, but before he could get it into firing position an enormous grizzly bear burst from the thicket and knocked him down with a mighty sweep of its paw. Behind the grizzly waited several growling cubs.

Dazed from the blow, Glass threshed about, attempting to rise to his feet. He realized that there was no more ferocious beast than a bear with cubs. The grizzly, like a wrestler, pinned his body flat, and he could not move the tremendous weight. He screamed in terror as he looked into the gaping, red mouth. Glass flayed the ground with his arms, shrieking in excruciating pain, as time and again the sharp pitchfork fangs tore at his body.

Finally the main expedition heard the terrible cries of the injured man and rushed forward to investigate. Hugh Glass was horribly mangled before the bear and her cubs scrambled over the rocks and disappeared in the tangle of brush along the river. In another instant the rescue party would have been too late. As it was, Glass was more dead than alive.

Andrew Henry shook his head regretfully. "He can't live," he said sadly.

It would have been impossible to carry Glass over the tortuous route that lay ahead. Nor could they wait. Winter was coming on.

Henry was forced to make a hard decision. He addressed the expedition:

"I'm asking for volunteers to stay behind and give this man a decent burial. The rest of us will go on to Yellowstone."

A Frenchman with the odd name of Fitzgerald and a boy called Jamie offered to stay behind with Glass. It is said that the boy Jamie was Jim Bridger, later a famous frontiersman. It was only a matter of hours until Glass would die, and they promised to see that he was buried properly. The remainder of the caravan started out again for the far-off land of Yellowstone.

But Hugh Glass did not die. For days he tossed on his blanket, moaning with fever and pain. His infected wounds were raw and bleeding. He cried out aloud, piteously begging to die, but Fitzgerald and Jamie, sitting beside him, could do

nothing. Sleep was impossible. The pleading groans continued far into the prairie night. Fitzgerald and Jamie tired of their dreadful vigil, and the sight of the emaciated Glass was sickening.

On the fifth day they could stand it no longer. They abandoned Hugh Glass, lying on his blanket, his body poisoned with fever. Before they left they took the doomed man's gun, his flint and his knife, so they could turn them over to Andrew Henry as proof that Glass had died.

Hours later, Glass recovered from his delirium. He looked around for his two guardians. He called softly, once, twice, and then lifted his voice in frantic despair: "Frenchy . . . Jamie!"

The hills mocked him as his voice echoed back to where he lay. He fell back breathless on his blanket. Momentarily he was too stunned to move. The stark horror of his utter helplessness raced his pulse-beat. They had left him in the middle of the prairie, without a single weapon, without a particle of food, to face a hideous death of starvation and disease!

Hugh Glass was consumed with a towering rage. There was only one thought in his mind now—to live. He wanted to live for revenge.

He lived for days in a thicket, existing on berries, roots and herbs. Still unable to walk, he began to crawl across the prairie, heading for Fort Kiowa on the Missouri River. At one point along the way, he came upon a pack of coyotes attacking a buffalo calf. Glass drove the coyotes away, and ate the calf raw, taking what portions of meat he could carry along with him.

"I'll kill them," he repeated over and over as he crawled along. "I'll kill them . . . kill them!"

PERHAPS it was this burning hatred that sustained the spark of life in his body. When he finally reached Fort Kiowa, he heard that another party was going to Yellowstone. He begged to join them, but he was bluntly refused. Pathetically he told his tragic story to the leader of the expedition. A gentle hand fell on his shoulder, and the leader's voice boomed comfort in his ear:

"God knows you've earned the right to come with us. Join us, my friend—and welcome."

Up the Missouri River they went, pressing ever onward. Disaster struck near what is now Bismarck, North Dakota. Arikara Indians attacked the party, and all but Glass were killed. Details of his escape are lacking. However, it is known that eventually he was found by the friendly Mandan tribe and taken to nearby Fort Tilton.

From there he set out alone for the post in Yellowstone. His wounds were healed now, but he had to travel slowly. Thirty-eight days later he arrived in Yellowstone. His hour of vengeance was near.

He asked for Fitzgerald, and the lad, Jamie. They weren't at Yellowstone. They were gone. Glass was dumbfounded.

"Where did they go?" he demanded angrily. "Where are they?"

A bearded scout told him. "They left for Fort Atkinson. That's a long way from here."

Only the indomitable courage of Glass withstood this blow. He walked away like a drugged man. Fort Atkinson was far across the country, along the Missouri River near Omaha. Sick and weary, bitter and disillusioned, he began the long trek back. After a few days of travel, he met a party of four men. He asked their destination.

"Fort Atkinson," one of the men answered. "Got a report to deliver."

"That's where I'm going," said Glass. "Mind if I join you?"

"No, be glad to have you. Long ways to travel alone."

They proceeded up Powder River, and

(Continued on page 126)

Blast Down Those Border Killers!

By
TOM ROAN

Smashing Border Novel

Flame lanced through the night as Phil Mohawk's gun barked. "Any of the rest of you want to die?" he asked.

It was like the jaws of an enormous trap closing: on one side the rumble and roar of a thousand stampeding hoofs; on the other the outlaw guns of Drag Brashada. And in the middle, Phil Mohawk's suicide squad of Brimstone Border jumpers!

CHAPTER ONE

Death at the Water Hole

THERE was blood on the saddle, on the horn, the skirts and the cantle, and some of it was smeared and caked in the white horse's silvery mane. It was dry now, hardened and turned dark by the hot, bright Arizona sun as he had come out of the Painted Desert, with a bullet rip in his right side, another

through the left shoulder, and still a third through the right thigh. But he couldn't pause to nurse his wounds, for ahead of him stretched the great Rainbow Plateau, across the Utah line.

The roar, the flame and burn of hot lead seemed to be a part of this Texan, for he had seen much of it in the past. An outlaw at seventeen, he had been redeemed and made a Ranger at twenty-three. He had spent five years at that, then had resigned in the face of strong protests. Now once again, he was riding a wanted man's trail.

Phil Mohawk had been born amidst violence and hot passions. From babyhood he had watched men lock themselves in mortal combat, with the knife and smoking gun to settle it—men fighting who feared neither hell nor the grave, or whether they left their bones in the sand for the buzzards to pluck.

The horse and saddle under him now were as good as stolen, but his own tall bay had been killed back there where seven men had been lying in wait for him, having trailed him up across the Mexican border and managed to get ahead of him. On a rise now he pulled rein and looked back, tall, grim and garbed in gray, man and white horse sometimes blending with the desert sands until they could barely be seen from a few miles away. In the disappearing sunlight his pale eyes were bitter, a mean curl to the thin, hard lips.

He had whipped them back there, just as he had torn Drag Brashada's gang apart a week ago south of the Border, in Brashada's own stronghold high in the Sierra Madre hills. In the Painted Desert he had killed four more of them. Only three had gotten away, and one of those was clinging like a sick buzzard over his saddle horn, hands clawed in his horse's mane. They had fled, unable to stand their ground in a real fight when the lead had grown thick enough to slap and cry around them, because one lone former Ranger, down on his belly in a dry wash behind his dead horse, refused to call it quits.

Now he was far away, but he knew that the end had not yet come. Drag Brashada would either follow him or have him trailed wherever he might go, for no man had yet beaten Drag Brashada, that hawk of the Border who came like the wind, struck like lightning, and was gone like wind in the darkest of nights. Besides all that, Phil Mohawk was not yet through with Mr. Brashada and the rest of his blood-letting crowd. Having left the Rangers to keep from stirring up "international complications" between the government of Mexico and the United States, he was not going to leave Drag Brashada alone until his shadow ceased to haunt the Border.

EVERYTHING looked clear behind behind him yet, but it had been that way for a long time before he had reached the Painted Desert. Men on the kill rarely advertised themselves. Back there now were only rolling desert, waterless dips and bends, patches of cactus here, sagebrush there, then hills of sand where the rattlesnakes crawled and the ungainly terrapins walked like old, old men on stilt-like legs, an occasional buzzard or two slow-sailing over and watching by day.

But there were yet three men back there, one probably too sorely wounded to ride, if not already dead. That would leave two then, two men who would not dare give up the trail to go back to the Sierra Madres and report failure to their master. They had six horses, and they would be able to travel fast, changing saddles when one horse tired, coming on, making a wide swing around to get ahead and again lie in wait for their man.

Phil Mohawk rode on, dropping to lower ground. When it was dark the stars came out, a great, mellow glow in the east telling him the moon was rising. From one of the higher places he had seen a tight cluster of trees ahead. That meant water

for himself and the horse, if there was no one there ahead of him to greet him with the sudden crash of a rifle.

When he came in sight of the trees he was as wary as a wolf again, lightly jerking his reins to keep the white horse from nickering at the smell of the water or other horses that might be there. Having had time back at the fight to jerk his saddlebags and bedding roll from his dead horse, there was still a strip of bacon, a can of beans and a tin of meat, enough for any man for the night and morning. Tomorrow there might be a rabbit or a bird, anything to keep him going until he could start his one-man fight all over again.

Watering the horse in a deep, blue pool surrounded by trees, he ate the beans and a slice of the bacon, making no fire, simply washing the food down with water. After he was through he might kindle a tiny glow, even as last night and the night before, and then get away from it to a safe distance just in case a killer came sneaking up in the darkness looking for him close to the fire.

But tonight there was no time for the glow. He had finished his allotted food, taking another long drink from the pool, the white horse cropping grass close by, when he was suddenly bucking to his feet, startled into alertness by the sounds of hoofs coming down over shale-covered ground from northward.

Somebody was coming, not one but four or five horses beginning to pick up to a fast trot at the smell of water and possibly the white horse ahead. On his feet at once, Mohawk threw the saddlebags back on the horse, quickly leading him away into the brush and a few low trees west of the water hole. In the dark mouth of a ravine he halted, turning the horse around and holding him by the nostrils as he waited and watched.

It was not long before he could see four horsemen and a tall, slender girl coming in the moonlight, two of the riders ahead of the girl, and two bringing up the rear, each man riding with a rifle across his lap and a six-shooter at his hip. Two of them wore enormous hats, the kind Mexicans would wear. The others were Americans; the moonlight showed him that just before they entered the shadow of the trees around the water.

"Best place to stop we're gonna have for a long time now." The leading man spoke, a big, bulbous-nosed, ruddy-faced man with a reddish beard, mounted on a tall, black horse. "We'll eat, rest a few hours, an' push on with our canteens filled."

THE SHADOWS hid them now, but Mohawk could see enough to tell him that the men were swinging down, the girl keeping to her saddle. Gathering dry sticks, they were soon bunching them and starting a fire. By its growing light, he could see the girl sitting there in the saddle of a short-coupled little bay, looking as if her hands were resting on the saddle horn, not a sound coming from her.

Light pots and pans were now being taken from saddles. A tall, hook-nosed Mexican, so thin he was not much more than a skeleton with a dark hide stretched tightly over his bones, came forward with a heavy sack. No one paid any attention to the girl until they were boiling coffee and frying thick steaks. Now the bulbous-nosed man, the leader, stepped back to the girl. As he reached up, Mohawk realized that the girl was riding with her wrists bound together and tied to the saddle horn.

"All right, Miss Annie," he grunted, "I reckon yuh can come down for a spell now. Somethin' to eat an' hot coffee will do yuh good. Yuh won't have to talk, but no tricks!" He added that harshly, looking up with a leer. "Ain't a damn soul in the world gonna help yuh now, nobody gonna follow, 'cause nobody'll know which way or where to come. Just in case they might, Pedro's back there watchin' the trail.

Here, let me help yuh to the ground."

"Stand aside!" ordered the girl. "I can help myself that much."

"Still a little tiger, ain't yuh, honey-hair?" The man laughed. "It ain't gonna do yuh a lot of good. We ain't hurtin' yuh—ain't gonna do nothin' like that. Wouldn't make yuh ride with yore hands tied if yuh hadn't pulled that fast trick of tryin' to get away. Hell," he laughed again, "all yo've got to do is to do as yo're told, an' safe an' sound as a *peso* you'll be when we get yuh crost the line to where we're goin'."

"And how long will that be?"

"Pushin' like we have to push," he answered, "it may be five or six days more. Natural-like, we've got to dodge towns an' such, an' it won't be always that we can ride by day. But," he shrugged, "we'll go through. Yuh ain't the first gal or woman who's been tooken over the line. Maybe yuh'll sorter get to like it down there. The man who sent for yuh can be damn good to wimmin—when they're nice to him."

The girl swung down. Wrists still in front of her, the man's hand on her left arm, she moved on closer to the fire. The tall Mexican had slipped off his saddle and was staking the horses out to graze only a few yards away. The bulbous-nosed man shoved the girl toward the saddle, and chuckled as he spoke:

"There's a seat for yuh, honey-hair! Yuh can see we'll do ever' nice thing we can for yuh, if yo'll just let us."

They were eating a short time later, using thin tin plates and tin cups, all noisy except the girl. She sat picking over her food, hungry as all get-out, as the watching Mohawk could see, the smacking and sucking coming from the bulbous-nosed man making her pause now and then and look at him with narrow blue eyes.

Mohawk waited, watching them gorge themselves. Before long, one of those heavily armed monks would be remounting his horse and riding back to the place where the Pedro they had mentioned twice now would be waiting to watch the trail behind them, and Pedro would be coming in to eat his supper and water his horse. Right now, while they were stuffed full of food, was the time to take care of these four and look out for Pedro later.

Leaving the white horse, Mohawk moved forward noiselessly, a man who never waited long to get a thing done. When he stepped out of the shadows and into the ring of firelight, a long, ivory-butted Frontier Colt filled each hand, each cocked, ready to go at a touch of the trigger.

THE GIRL saw him first, looking up, then dropping her fork. The bulbous-nosed man was to her left, swilling his last cup of hot, black coffee. He looked up, eyes widening, the hand holding the cup slowly lowering. The thin Mexican was next, dark eyes appearing to pop forward in their sunken sockets, two words coming from him like a hiss in Spanish: *"Sacre Madre!"*

The second Mexican, shorter, thicker, and wearing a drooping mustache, jerked his head half around. *"Qué es esto?"*

"It's—a man!" gasped the second American, a big, black-bearded man with six-shooters at his hips and another pair swung in shoulder holsters below his armpits.

"Set—and live!" Phil Mohawk's voice was flat. "The girl has nothing to fear. Lift your hands, the rest of you—or die where you're sitting! Never mind yours, young lady!" He snapped that at her. "I heard them talking. Reach, you others!"

"Like hell!" The bulbous-nosed man was quicker than a striking rattler, trying to throw himself behind the girl. A shot stabbed the night, then another as the second American tried to hurl himself back in the brush behind him. The girl

screamed and bounced to her feet, the tin pan falling from her lap.

"Easy, Miss Annie!" Mohawk had heard that much of her name. "Remember what I said. I'm only here to help you. Any of the rest of you want to die right fast?"

"No, no, *señor!*" Both the Mexicans had shot up their hands, the long, lean one answering him, the other staring from the bulbous-nosed man to the other, each with a blood-fluttering hole in the side of his head to mark the unerring aim of the .45's. "We would like much to live and not die like dogs."

"Just stand back another pace, Miss Annie." Mohawk made his tone as gentle as he could, afraid that the girl was about to bolt and flee into the brush. "I'll take you out of this. Look, hombres!" He had advanced to within seven or eight feet of the two Mexicans, both now on their feet, hands and arms stretched straight skyward, and he was speaking to the skinny one. "Lower your hands slowly. Unbuckle your belts and let them drop, then turn your back to me, keeping your hands up. Then your friend will do the same thing. And remember that I heard what was said about a Pedro on the back trail. I'll take care of him when I finish with you here. Steady, Miss Annie." He fired another glance at the girl. "I'm your friend if you'll let me be." He tried to reassure her with a smile. "How far back is that Pedro?"

"I'd say," her voice trembled, "about two miles. On—on a tall rise covered with brush and—and a few low trees."

"Good enough." He grinned. "Far enough away not to hear the shots. All right, hombre!" His eyes glinted for an instant on the shorter Mexican. "You can let your weapons drop now, but just keep in mind that dying and going to hell can be fast around here."

"*Señor,* I do not crave to die." The man lowered his hands carefully, keeping them stretched in front of him until they were on a level with his wide belts, then bending his elbows just enough to bring them to the buckles. When the belts and six-shooters had dropped he immediately swung his arms straight overhead again. "I do not need to be shot. A man only has to tell me what to do when he covers me with guns and I myself have seen how fast and straight he can shoot."

Taking the cords from the girl's wrists, Mohawk soon had their hands whipped behind them and tied in place, ordering each one to sit back on the ground when he had finished with him. Moving forward, he stripped the belts and weapons from the two dead men, taking the shoulder holsters and six-shooters from the black-beard, tossing them all in a pile at the girl's feet.

"Now it's quiet again," he told her. "Forget what happened. I had a little something to eat, but I want more, especially some of that coffee, and then, ma'am, we'll be heading back the way you came. If you want to, you can tell me where these men were going with you, though I already have a very good idea."

"They were taking me to the Sierra Madre Mountains of Mexico," she said. "My father and brother operate a silver mine there, in a place called San Miguel. These men told me little, but I know my father and brother are in trouble. I was, in some way, to be the go-between. That's all I know. They came to my house this morning. It is in the edge of Silver Springs, rather isolated. Coming in the back way, they found me alone, and—and," she started crying now, "they brought me this far."

"Steady now." He took her gently by the shoulder and led her to a flat-topped rock on the other side of the fire from the dead men. "Trust me, ma'am, and I'll get you back to Silver Springs by sunrise in the morning, if you can stand the ride after the day you've had."

"I—I could almost walk it!" she said.

"Then trust me." He gave her shoulder a small pat. "Help me to help you, and we'll go through. Just tell me one thing. Did either of these men ever mention the name of Drag Brashada?" He paused, then repeated it slowly, emphatically. *"Drag Brashada?"*

"No." She shook her head. "I'm sure I never heard that name."

"They'd be mighty careful with it." He glanced at the two silent and helpless Mexicans. "Drag Brashada is a dangerous man, even to ride with, I'd suspect. Finish your supper now, Miss Annie. Forget that anything happened, and we'll be on our way."

"The quicker we go the better." She looked nervously behind her. "I am afraid of that big, hulking Pedro, back there watching the trail. He—he might come slipping up on us!"

"But he couldn't hear the shots, ma'am." He settled down beside the fire, reaching for a clean pan and cup that had evidently been set aside for Pedro. "Come and finish your supper. You'll need it."

She shook her head violently. "I—I feel as if I could never, never eat a bite again."

"You'll change your mind before morning." He smiled at her as he poured a cup of the rich black coffee. "I'll take along a couple of sandwiches to help you out."

THEY had cooked an abundance of food. Washing the coffee pot when he was through, he packed it full, the Mexicans watching him sullenly, the tall one glancing at the brush now and then. When he was ready to go for the horses he had them back up to a tree and tied them there with a rope, making certain that neither would bolt when his back was turned. Then, picking up a belt and a six-shooter, he buckled the weapon around the girl's waist.

"Might come in handy," he told her with a smile. "I'm going for the horses now."

He brought them all in, including the white one, and resaddled those that had been unsaddled. Hanging six-shooters on one saddle, he gathered up the rest of the food and the pots and pans, while the Mexicans stared at him, their faces paling.

"Señor, wait!" the tall one finally cried. "Do you go away and leave us like this?"

"Yes," said the short one, "without guns, without food or horses, and tied like dogs left to starve to this tree!"

"Why not?" Mohawk almost laughed at them. "Didn't either one of you think of the possibility of running into hard luck somewhere in your wild travels when you started dragging your ropes with Drag Brashada?"

"We—we never heard that name before tonight," whined the tall one. "I swear it! The two you killed hired us. They promised us five hundred dollars if we would help get the girl over the line. That is all we know about it."

"Later on you'll think of something else." He led the girl's little bay forward. "And as far as you getting away from that tree, you'll manage it after we're gone. It'll be a long, long walk back to Mexico. Better snare some rabbits before you start. Here's a canteen." He took one from a saddle and tossed it at their feet. "Thirst is a terrible thing, especially in a burning desert country. Stay good," he smirked, giving them their usual farewell, "and go with God!"

Even the girl must have thought that he would not leave them like that, but he swung up in his saddle, giving her two horses to lead while he took the other two. She kept glancing back as they rode away, and when they were less than six hundred yards away she put her thoughts into words.

"It—it's inhuman to leave them there to stand and starve!"

"They won't." He was beside her now, riding quietly along the valley floor between two tall hills. "It's not as bad as you

think. They won't be long in getting away from the tree. I saw to that. One of them can get down behind the other on his knees and untie the cords with his teeth. Each is carrying a small hideout gun strapped inside his trouser leg just above the knee. They can kill something around the water hole—if somebody doesn't come there to help them. They can walk it back to Silver Springs, and that's what they'll probably do, never daring to push on across the desert afoot.

"But Pedro's on my mind now, Miss Annie. Keep a sharp lookout for the knoll he's hiding on. If a little gunfire comes, don't let it startle you. Just make sure that it's me coming back from that rise. If it isn't, then start shooting—and ride like hell for it, taking all the horses you can with you. But," he shrugged, "something tells me I'll be the one coming back. To assure you, I'll be whistling *Remember Me.* Do you know the tune?"

"Yes!" she half whispered. "But—but who are you? Why are you going to such —such desperate lengths to help me?"

"I know the man who sent up here to have you brought to San Miguel." He looked up at the sky, eyes hard for a moment. "I've taken out a big stack of chips in that fellow's game, and I'm going to play them out to the last hand."

"But I don't understand!"

"You will, Miss Annie," he smiled on, "after I take care of our Pedro ahead, I won't mind telling you who I am. My enemies already know me. A couple or three may yet be back there on my trail."

CHAPTER TWO

Gunmen on the Skyline

THE RISE ahead was dark and still in the moonlight when they came in sight of it. Having traveled over stretches of shale, then sand that muffled the hoofs of the six horses into a mere whispering, they were on sand again, halted just behind the blunt shoulder of rock and dry earth, the girl pointing.

"He's up there," she whispered. "On top and over on the other side."

"Then stay here," he whispered. "We'll take the horses back a few yards to keep the one on the rise from nickering to them if he sees them or smells them. I won't be long."

"And—and," she was getting scared again, "you won't forget to be whistling, if it's you."

"*Remember Me* will be the tune," he said. "Keep a sharp eye on the back trail while you wait." Then he was gone.

Pedro, up on the knoll was almost wonderfully accommodating. Creeping up and up, taking advantage of every clump and piece of brush, Mohawk reached the top of the rise, dropped flat on his stomach as a horse pawed the ground impatiently just a few rods ahead of him.

He was soon able to see the horse, hidden under the thick pines. It took longer to find Pedro. A snore finally gave him away, then another and another. Swinging to the left of the horse, Mohawk slipped on. And there was Pedro, his back to a tree, his big sombrero tilted forward over his eyes —sound asleep.

With a six-shooter's muzzle poked in his side, Pedro came out of it with a startled grunt, sudden fear going through him like a bolt of lightning. On his feet with a furious spring, he wheeled, both hands dropping and pawing for his holsters, then consternation filling him.

"You are too late, Pedro." Mohawk spoke to him in Spanish. "While you were enjoying your sleep I took your guns. Raise your hands!"

"But—you!" gasped the Mexican. "Where do you come from?"

"No matter now. Toss me your gunbelts! And make sure not to grab for anything else—unless you want to die."

"Yes, yes, *señor!*" Caught red-handed,

Pedro had no desire to fight. "I do not wish to die! There is my Rosalito. She is waiting for me in Mexico. What is it you would have me do?"

Mohawk soon told him, and in few moments. Pedro was being marched off the rise, his weapons gone and hung to his saddle, his horse following the American. Pedro walked stiffly, his hands fast behind him with pigging strings taken from his big saddle. When they got fairly close to the girl Mohawk started whistling.

"I was praying," the girl told him when he was close enough, "that there would be no more gunfire."

"Sometimes it doesn't take guns." Mohawk grinned in the moonlight. "Pedro was nice about it. He was sound asleep up there. Keep going, Pedro. Your friends are at the water hole ahead. When you get back to Mexico, give my love to the buzzards and tell them I'll give them Drag Brashada one of these days for a feast."

"Ah, *señor,* then you know the great Drag Brashada!" Pedro brightened up now, a wide grin crossing his face. "Then this is all a great joke on poor Pedro?"

"Not exactly, Pedro." Mohawk was playing him now. "He sent me up here to see why it was taking you and the others so long."

"But, *señor,* we were quick enough!" Surprise filled Pedro's dark eyes now. "Only three days in the Silver Springs, and this morning we come away with the girl!"

"The great Drag didn't tell me why he wanted her, Pedro. Just why does he want her, anyway?"

"Señor," the Mexican's eyes were suddenly narrowing, "if he did not tell you, then the telling is not for Pedro. Who are you? What is the girl and all the horses doing back here? What trick is this?"

"Get going!" Mohawk caught him by the shoulder, wheeled him around and gave him a swift kick. "Anything else would be lies, now that you have become suspicious. And now you can get going!"

"But, *señor,*" wailed the Mexican, "must I go afoot with my hands behind me and no horse under me?"

For an answer Mohawk gave him another kick. He was about to deliver a third when the Mexican broke and ran for it, not one to stand and argue with his hands tied behind him.

"LET'S get out of here now, Miss Annie." Mohawk swung back into the saddle of the white horse, bringing Pedro's horse around behind him to travel beside the other two he was leading. "Later we'll change saddles, giving our horses a rest. In that way we can make plenty of time—or have you been traveling at a fast clip all day?"

"The first few miles were fast, at a pace I thought would kill my bay," she told him. "Then they slowed down after making certain we were not being followed, when we came to a tall ridge and they could look back and study the country through a powerful telescope you'll find on one of the saddles."

He nodded. "Good. We'll go back the same way to Silver Springs. When you get there and let your friends know what happened to you, you should be safe. But don't depend too much on it. The man who sent these men after you is rarely known to give up when he starts after somebody."

"But why would he or anybody else want me?"

"That's for him to tell you, I guess," he said. "Nobody knows the workings of the mind of Drag Brashada, outlaw, killer, cattle and horse rustler. They all know him down along the Border."

He was silent for a long time after that, almost gloomy. After a few more miles they changed horses. When he mounted the one with the coffee pot on the saddle he thought of the food again. Opening the pot, they ate as they rode, washing it down

from one of the well-filled canteens they had brought along. It was after midnight before she reminded him of something.

"You promised to tell me something of yourself after you had taken care of Pedro. I still don't know your name. I'm just plain Annie White, if that'll help you start."

"It does," he said, "and a promise is a promise. I'm Phil Mohawk, and not a lot to brag about as you'll soon know. I had to shoot two cattle rustlers when I was seventeen. One turned out to be a politician's brother, the other a disbarred lawyer trying to pick up some fast money so that he could grease palms and get back in the game. That outlawed me until I was twenty-three. Then a new local administration investigated and dropped the charges. I was made a Texas Ranger for five years, throwing up the sponge a month ago. It's a long story, ma'am, and I'd rather not go on with the rest of it. It's not pretty."

"But I want to know it."

He settled lower in his saddle. "Some day, maybe. Right now, we're looking for Silver Springs, and I want to get you there safe and sound."

"But they can't follow us now!" she cried. "Not afoot as they are back there."

"There might be others, with horses," he told her grimly. "If they kill me, and they will on sight, they might yet take you back. Here, let's have another steak. I've been hungry so long I'll never get enough to fill me up again."

He kept talking about food when he might have been telling her about Texas, of having to kill a man within six or seven hours after he had resigned from the Rangers and certain ones who had time to find it out; he might have told her that the man he killed was a brother of one of the first, back when he was seventeen, and the politician who made it so hard on him.

Going on back to seventeen, he might have told her of the eleven men who had ridden with him for nearly four years to sweep the country clean of cattle and horse thieves. Then he might have told her more of his lone-wolf ride into Drag Brashada's stronghold, of the hell he had played there until he had had to flee, never even catching sight of Brashada himself.

But what was the use of talking about himself? Some day it would all come out in the way things always came out. Silver Springs was on his mind now. He had heard about it, a little mining town right on the Utah-Arizona line. Beyond it, deep in a hideout in the tall hills, he would find old friends, every one of them wanted yet. But every one had shaken his hand and had wished him luck five years ago when he had told he was going into the Rangers. Each one had promised that he would never have to be faced over the hot barrels of guns. In turn he had promised to make them free men again some day. They'd still remember him, a square-shooter when outlawed, a square-shooter in the Rangers. Red hell would weep again in the Border country before he was through. . . .

THE FIRST HINT of dawn found them yet a dozen miles from Silver Springs. He was watching the back country like a hawk, a feeling having been his the night through that somebody was sneaking along back there. Locating the horse with the telescope on the saddle, he made good use of that instrument.

As the light in the east brightened into a golden streak on the sky-line they came to a tall knoll covered with low pines. Mohawk led the way in behind it, then up a gentle slope to the top to pull rein.

"What is it?" demanded the girl. "Why are you so nervous when we are getting so close to the Springs?"

"I play a lot of hunches," he told her. "Generally things work out best when I listen to that unexplainable inner feeling."

He was busy with the telescope again, studying the horizon. Finally the telescope rested on a far distant rise, with the broadening streak of moving light directly behind it. There he saw a rider appear, down in a little, V-shaped crack in the rise. Mohawk studied him for nearly a minute, then saw another and another. Silently, he handed the telescope to the girl, helping to steady it as she brought it to her eye to look at the rise. It took a moment for a little breath of a gasp to come from her.

"It—it looks like Pedro in the lead!" she stammered. "I'm sure it's Pedro! Only he wouldn't have a horse. It—it can't be Pedro!"

"And yet I'm sure it is," he nodded grimly. "Behind him there'll be the others. Back there in the Painted Desert I left three men with six good horses. One of the men was wounded. He might have died, or they might have left him to die, and come on with his horse. At the water hole where I first saw you they could have picked up the others, having a horse for each man and an extra one besides that one, and—"

"There are six horses up there now!" she cried, interrupting him shortly. "One has an empty saddle! But—but," a great fear filled her eyes, "they wouldn't dare come back to Silver Springs! Not after what they did to me! They'll never show their faces here again!"

"Don't be too sure of that, Annie White." He smiled at her. "They have a job to do—two, in fact, now they know I'm with you. Not a one in the crowd would dare to go back to Mexico and say he had fallen down on an order from Drag Brashada. To go back and admit that would probably mean ending up stretched across some big ant-hill in the canyon, the ants carrying him away bit by bit until there was no more to carry. I suppose you know such things *are* done now and then in Mexico."

CHAPTER THREE

Pedro Takes the Lead

THE SUN was in the sky, more than an hour high, before they rode through a break in a tall ridge and looked down on Silver Springs, lying there in the floor of a deep, mile-wide valley.

It was mostly adobe and flat-roofed houses jammed this way and that, some of them staggered up on the slopes, others in lines almost hidden along the creek. On the higher places were the shacks, huts and skeleton framework of mine dumps. Eight out of eleven of them showed smoke rising from long, rough-planked sheds and boiler houses.

"Larger than I thought," he told her. "Must have three or four hundred people here, Miss Annie."

"Nearer seven hundred," she said. "I know. I teach music, and I once helped out in the post office. That's our house on the rise." She pointed to the right. "A good seven hundred yards from the nearest one, but Dad wanted it like that. He still owns an interest in three of the mines here, but no one knows when they'll run out—and leave another ghost town on the desert rim."

"Nobody can tell about mines." He was still studying the town. "But if you have that many people here, then you must have a marshal or two to take care of things. You'll probably need them, Miss Annie. I've got to push on another day's ride before I turn back. But," he squared his shoulders, "you'll have friends, too."

"Most of the town." She nodded. "I'm no longer afraid now, even," she glanced behind them quickly, "if we were being followed at dawn. They'll never dare to come on. Besides, when I tell my story, men from the Springs will be dashing out to find them."

"Good," he said. "But before I go

on I want to know that you've gathered your friends close around you—and be sure there are some fighting men in the crowd."

"Don't worry about that," she assured him. "I'll have them. But," something like a cloud came into the blue eyes, "must you go on? You say those men back there will kill you on sight. In Silver Springs my friends will be your friends, and I'll manage it—"

He held up his hand, cutting her short. "Some day in the future I might come back here. Let's let it go at that."

She argued as a woman would, trying to get more and more out of him about himself, but he had told her enough. Before they reached the rear of her house her face had flushed angrily several times. Now she gave it up as hopeless.

"All right!" She tried to smile. "You know what you have to do, but if you ever need a friend I'll be it. The same goes for Dad, once he has time to hear about this and what you did for me. Go on and don't worry a moment about me. We have two marshals here. With them and my friends nothing will happen to me."

"Don't be too sure," he warned. "I'll come back this way in three or four days to see how you're getting along."

Neither knew—though it would not have surprised him had he known—that they were already being watched from a little pine thicket on the rim of a towering rise to the east.

With the two men from the Painted Desert, who had come to the water hole a couple of hours after Mohawk and the girl were gone—two men with six horses—Pedro Gonzales had made a lightning trip, knowing this country and the short cuts.

He was not afraid, and he had little reason to be, as long as he kept himself and the little bunch out of sight. With him were Bones Lopez, the skeleton from the water hole, and Juan Chacon, the short, thickset Mexican with the drooping mustache.

THE TWO men from the desert were not Mexicans. One was Jude Milton, French, white and Indian, a big, broad-shouldered man of forty with unruly curls of long black hair and beard. Dash Cannon, as he called himself, was a little of everything, shorter than Milton, hump-backed, his face splotched with color. He was from the Mississippi canebrake country, and had once led a gang of riverboat pirates. All of them were now heavily armed, for Milton and Cannon had picked up every fighting weapon of their dead comrades behind them, leaving the last one to die alone only a few miles away from the place where the fight had taken place.

"I am never afraid here," boasted the big, dark Pedro Gonzales now. "And why should I be? My older brother, Leon Gonzales, is the head marshal of the town. He will take care of us."

"That much I know," agreed the skinny Bones Lopez, "but the question now is when do we eat again?"

"We still have a few tins of junk in our saddlebags," answered Milton. "A good thing Phil Mohawk didn't search 'em. That'll hold us for a spell, an' tonight we oughta be able to steal somethin'."

"Tonight, my friend," frowned the big Pedro, "we'll eat at my good brother's table, and there will be much wine with the food. But," he glowered at Lopez, "it is always a fool who thinks first of his belly instead of other and more dangerous things."

They watched for two hours. Mohawk and the girl had reached the house long before, leaving the horses at a hitchrack in front of it. Mohawk had waited on the porch. The girl had gone galloping on into the town, returning with a string of people

behind her. Pedro chuckled when he finally saw a big, bulbous Mexican galloping up on a large, broad-hipped bay.

"My brother now goes to listen to the tale." He silenced the chuckle to a smile. "He is a great talker, that Leon."

"It's all well an' good for yuh three," Cannon was growling thirty minutes later when he saw Mohawk leave the house, moving out to the tall white horse at the hitchrack. "Yuh stick here, an' we've gotta push on, 'cause that fool Mohawk's goin' on. If we don't follow an' take his nose an' ears back to the boss, then we'd better head for the Canadian line, an' keep goin' after we get there. Drag never forgives a man for fallin' down on a job."

"An'," said Milton, "we now go with only a couple or three tins of grub left—an' this damn fool Pedro talkin' about a feast tonight."

"Señor," Gonzales looked at him with a deep scowl, "I have gone much, much further than that with nothing to start on. You have guns, and salt and pepper, and there is still some coffee left. There is game on the way, wild birds in the trees in the evening, and rabbits in the bush by day. All we can do from here is to wish you the best of luck. You have one job to do, and we have another. This time we will not fail, because it is Pedro Gonzales who will give the orders and lead the way. And when Pedro Gonzales leads," he shrugged and smiled, "only the devil can follow his trail. Even the great Drag himself will tell you that—eh, no?"

TAKING the telescope, knowing he was being followed, Mohawk had left as soon as possible. With a stream at hand, he had cleaned the dried blood from the white horse and the big Mexican saddle and bridle. Having had food at the house, and carrying more with him now, he had no thought of resting or sleeping until he could put Silver Springs behind him.

The girl had plenty of friends around her now, the story of her kidnaping having spread over the entire town. Among those who had expressed their anger, though, was one Mohawk could not like. That was the head marshal, the big, strutting Leon Gonzales, looking like a Mexican badman under his great, upturned sombrero, and with his bandoleers of cartridges crisscrossed on his massive chest, and his six-shooters shining at his hips. Gonzales talked too much, promised a lot more than a wiser man would have promised.

"It is I, Leon Gonzales," he had boasted, "who will revenge this bold act! No man or men can best Leon Gonzales!" He had slapped his chest many times. "Give me a little time, and I will bring them in."

Warning the girl at every opportunity, Mohawk had had to come away. Now he was heading up the valley that branched off to the north, the white horse a target visible miles away. But sometimes a man wanted a horse like that. Coldly, deliberately, he wanted to be followed now, knowing that the sooner he could get down to cases with those trailers back there, the better it would be.

By the middle of the afternoon he was studying an old drawing on what had once been a smooth piece of yellow wrapping paper, something he had taken from his inner coat pocket to scan many times since he had left the Rangers to tackle Drag Brashada. The paper was cracked and worn through in several places, but he could still make it out.

When nightfall came it looked as if he was going right on with no thought of stopping, but when he came to a tall pinnacle of rock standing like a great blue finger pointing skyward in the center of the valley, he swung abruptly into a dense thicket of scrub-oak. In wall of cliffs nearby he came to a mere crack in the rocks and urged his tired horse into it.

Then came a mile of winding and twisting down a narrow path to a great, deep basin with a little stream meandering down the center of it. One light in a rude log cabin now showed ahead. It went out when he spurred the jaded horse into a worn-out trot. When he was two hundred yards away he pulled up, cupping his hands around his mouth and whistling a low-rolling call that might have come from some night bird in the bushes somewhere along the Rio Grande.

He waited a minute, and sent out the call again. Then, waiting two minutes, he sent it out the third time. Soon a whistle came back to him. With a grin, he rode on, tall and straight in his saddle. Sixty yards from the cabin where the light had shone he saw seven men coming out of the shadows, each with a rifle balanced across the crook of his arm, six-shooters shoved forward on his belt. Two were decidedly Americans, the others Mexican. A tall, lean old man in patched gray was the first to speak.

"I'm damned if it ain't Phil Mohawk, boys!"

"Where's Joe Dice?" He was down and shaking hands with them a minute later. "And Frank Spencer?"

"Joe was huntin' wild goat last fall." Long and lean old Ben Rider was pumping his hand up and down. "Fell off the cliffs an' broke his fool neck. Frank got pewmoney last winter an' cashed in his stock. But to hell with the dead! Let's talk of the livin'. What brings yuh here? Don't tell me it's fixed so we can all go back to Texas!"

"It soon will be—if you birds can still ride and fight."

"Ride an' fight!" Rider laughed. "I was born in the saddle of a half-wild hoss goin' ninety miles an hour—with a sixgun in each hand. I expect to die that way some day. But what's this all about? Pile 'er on the line. Right or wrong, yuh know where we stand with yuh."

He told them all he could, speaking rapidly, and they stood there listening like mutes. Now and then one of the five Mexicans smiled, but that was all until he came to the point of telling them he had been followed up the valley from Silver Springs by two men. Old Ben Rider merely looked at a tall, lean Mexican and a short, squatty one. He nodded, and they nodded, turning on their heels and moving away toward a little corral under the trees to southward. By the time Mohawk could answer a sudden run of questions they were swinging out on two tall, fast horses.

"They'll take care of yore tail feathers," old man Rider said, grinning. "Leave it to Juan an' Alberto. Yuh come on in an' have a bite to eat, then some shut-eye. Yuh look dead on yore feet."

"But there's still plenty of riding to do, Ben!"

"Tomorrow 'round noon'll do!" growled the old man. "A man ain't made of iron an' steel an' run by steam. Come on." He grabbed him by the arm. "It's vittles now, then the blankets."

CHAPTER FOUR

Hell Along the Border

THE TWO Mexicans came back soon after midnight, putting their sweaty horses in the corral and rubbing them dry with blankets. Going to their cabin they immediately dropped into rude chairs and started cleaning their six-shooters and one of the two rifles they had carried along with them on their saddles.

Mohawk knew nothing of their return. Full of good food, he had tumbled into a bunk, old Ben Rider and the big, horny-handed Dart Turner, the second white man, pulling off his boots and his trousers, then throwing a blanket over him. After that they had gone to their bunks, moving quietly. Mohawk slept until the sun was high in the sky in the morning. Rolling

over, blinking a few times, he dragged himself off the edge of the bunk, the smell of boiling coffee coming to him.

"Oughta stayed there till sundown," growled Rider from the little sheet-iron stove in the corner. "Dead tired as yuh was."

"Where are the others?"

"Out checkin' up on the hosses." Rider turned back to the stove. "Wash yore face an' hands, an' I reckon yuh can set down to eat. I saw yuh was gonna wake, an' there's biscuits in the stove, sage hen ready to fry. We eat good here at times."

"What did Juan Roberto and Alberto Leonardo find when they went out of here last night?" Mohawk asked the question when he was pouring water in a tin basin. "Anything?"

"Yup." Rider was putting sage hen in a pan of hot grease. "They did, like yuh mighta knowed they would."

"Either get hurt?"

"Nope." Rider turned his head and scowled at him across his shoulder now. "Why'n hell start the mornin' axin' a lot of damn fool questions, Phil? Them two won't be followin' yuh or anybody else from now on, an' just let it go at that. Did have two crackerjack hosses." He grinned. "For fast travelin' we can use some extras. Come an' start on some coffee. Food will soon be ready."

It was a good breakfast, but there was little talk. He had told them why he had come, and they had no more questions to ask. As he was pushing back his plate and cup, big old Dart Turner came in.

"I figure," he grunted, "sundown's a good time to start."

"Sundown?" Mohawk jerked halfway to his feet. "Sundown, hell! We want to get going before—"

"Sundown's plenty time," growled Turner, cutting him short. "We ain't goin' the way yuh come in. It's a short cut, rough in a lot of places, but it'll put us in Silver Springs well 'fore midnight—an' that's soon enough for us to get there. Better catch some more rest. Yore white hoss is doin' fine, eatin', restin', an' sleepin'. He'll be ready to go when the time comes."

There was no use in arguing with these men, harder than nails on one side, soft as melted butter on the other. Too tired yet to quarrel, Mohawk hit the bunk again. A couple of hours before sundown he was up and giving himself a long-needed bath in an' old half-barrel tub of hot water, Rider digging up clean clothes for him. Then they were eating again.

The sun was gone before they pulled out, heading down along the little stream and through a big tunnel under the cliffs. They climbed steadily after that, behind them four extra horses, each one loaded with food and canteens. Mounting the last rise, they saw Silver Springs below them. It was not yet late enough for all the lights in the houses and huts to be out, and there were still a few people in the saloons.

Mohawk looked for a light in Annie White's house and was relieved when he saw squares of yellow glow showing through the blinds of three of the windows. Then they were swinging slowly down a ledge trail. Hugging the timber, Mohawk led the way up close to the girl's house, leaving the others behind while he rode on to the porch. When he was about to swing down at the hitchrack two big men in huge hats came out of the shadows. One of them was Marshal Leon Gonzales.

"The *señorita* is not here, *señor*." Gonzales did all the talking, the second man never opening his mouth. "We were afraid for her here after she had told us everything, showing us some letters from her father. Between myself and her friends, we got her to make a little trip. She left on the late afternoon stage for California. But wait!" He jerked up a big hand. "Fear not for her safety. Aboard the

stage were three of my best men, and no harm can come to her."

"California?" Mohawk's face paled. "She never once mentioned California to me, Marshal!"

"But, *señor*," said the big Mexican, "she has two uncles and five or six cousins in Los Angeles. It will be a big place with many marshals and other peace officers around her, and all her friends told her to go. Maybe this will ease your thoughts of any doubt."

He took a small, neat letter from the inside pocket of his coat and handed it forward. Mohawk took it eagerly, hands trembling slightly for some reason. Opening it and holding it close, he read it by the starlight.

> Dear Good Friend,
> I wanted to wait, but everybody, even my best friends, told me it was best to go. Somehow, some day, I truly hope to see you again. There are many friends in California, and almost a score of relatives who will help me find out what has gone wrong with Dad. . . .

Suddenly, without finishing it, he crammed it in his pocket in a crushed wad. Wheeling his horse, he rode away back into the timber, the night swallowing him. But even as he rode he could not help feeling that the big marshal was silently laughing to himself behind him.

"YOU have done well, Pedro Gonzales," Drag Brashada said. "Better than all the others, and for it I am going to make you a captain. The fair one is most fair, and she could not have come through better on a feather pillow."

"It was simple, after I took charge." Pedro Gonzales was never more cocksure of himself, the long, long journey behind him at last. Once more after many days and long nights of hard traveling he was sitting face to face with Drag Brashada in the deep, cliff-walled pit in the tall mountains, the huge log and stone house here sitting under an upfling of cliffs. Leaning forward now, elbows on the table between them, his eyes were bright, big hat on the back of his head, a self-satisfied smile making his dark face shine.

"And besides," he said, "there was my brother in Silver Springs to help me, as I have helped him with this and that in the past. It was he who helped talk her into the notion of California, knowing I would be waiting on the trail to stop the stage and wreck it, then come away with the horses as we came away with the fair *señorita*. Had the others who were with me listened, there might have been more alive to return."

"But Juan Chacon and Bones listened, and they came through. I'll reward them too, Pedro. I pay well when men work well for me."

Drag Brashada weighed two hundred and sixty, a man of forty-odd, sandy hair bushy and wild, eyes like two small, pale buttons. Being almost six feet six, there seemed to be but little extra fat on him. He spoke Spanish far better than his own native tongue, having come to Mexico nearly a dozen years before from the bottom lands of the Mississippi where he had been a steamboat fireman before breaking the mate's neck and skull with a shovel one night when upriver-bound for St. Louis. A dive overboard and a long swim into the canebrakes had taken him to safety. And from the Mississippi he had fled to Mexico.

He had been here in this deep pit white men called Coffin Cañon for nearly three years now, working quietly and cautiously at the beginning, taking care that his name did not spread too far. Above him, up there on the high slopes less than three miles away, was Little San Miguel, from which rich pack-trains had gone out at the end of every week, taking silver and some gold out of the hills. Now those trains went out only once a month, sometimes only once in six or seven weeks,

much richer and much longer, sometimes a hundred mules in a single string, and often guarded by as many as two hundred men riding the rims with the best of weapons to see that they got through.

Tall, lean and gray-mustached Dave White, owner of one of the smaller mines up there, had been the cause of that, banding together the other mine owners, getting them to shut down everything for two or three days at a time when gold and silver was to go, half the men of the mines going out as guards, the other half staying behind to watch the town.

"White will listen to reason now," Brashada said, smiling, a great, cat-like man, his elbows on the table, back to a curtained window. "A man can always be struck down through his family, and more than half of the mine owners up there, as well as the workers, don't like his idea of shutting down everything just because a pack-train must go out."

He said nothing about cattle and horses due to come across the Border tonight with more than twenty hard-fighting and hard-riding men behind them. Wet cattle and horses, as men called them, had become a paying business. There were buyers on this side of the Border who would take a herd off his hands almost immediately, and it was the same on the other side when it came to Mexican cattle and horses being rushed across in places where scouts told him there was little danger.

Now it was already after ten o'clock. Getting rid of Pedro soon, Drag Brashada leaned back and smiled. Then he moved forward, jerked on a cord that made a small bell tinkle in the distance. In a few moments there was a tap on the door, and a short, thick-bellied American by the name of Rube Curly slipped inside and closed the door behind him.

"Yuh can bring 'er in now, Rube," Brashada said in English. "I'll take a look at close range this time."

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"An' she's a looker," said the American, grinning. "Yeah, an' a snappin' little wildcat with it, Drag. I'll fetch 'er in a minute."

"Then leave us," nodded the big cat behind the desk. "I never worry a lot about 'em bein' a little wild. Even rattlesnakes can be handled."

HE WAITED five minutes, getting impatient. On the verge of bouncing out of his chair and going to see what was keeping Curly and the girl, he dropped back, relaxing when a light knock sounded at the door. It opened then, the girl, dressed in a light brown suit, entering. Behind her a man whisked himself inside, gently closing the door behind him. At once Drag Brashada saw the flash of the big Colt in his right hand. The sight slumped him back in his chair, face going white, wide and thick lips bloodless as a gasp came from him.

"What—the hell!"

"Not too much noise, Drag!" The order was low, the man reaching behind him to lock the door. "I think we've seen each other before. Remember me?"

"Phil Mohawk!" Brashada glanced right and left, hands still on the table. "How did yuh get here?"

"On a rope down the cliffs and right behind you." Mohawk, the former Ranger, was smiling now, the cocked Colt in his hand unwavering. "While your guards were watching the other places. You might have known I'd play a return engagement. This looks like it, Brashada."

"What in the hell could yuh do with me here?" Brashada leaned forward, not daring to make a move toward the weapons at his hip or to the drawer under the center of the table where more weapons were waiting for a quick hand. "Yuh was allus a darin' fool. Everbody says that. Yuh come once before, but it didn't do yuh much good. Wouldn't o' done anythin' if

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I'd been here, though yuh did turn out a big gang of horses in a valley close by an' sent 'em high-tailin' back for the Border. In the gun busts yuh killed some of my men. But here, yo're in the cañon itself, in my house, men all 'round me—"

"There's no use in going on, Drag." Passing the girl to his right, Mohawk moved forward, a thin, hard little smile on his face. "If I can come down on a rope, we can all go out the same way. Steady! If you make one quick move I'll shoot you down like the yellow dog you are. Lift your hands."

He was quiet, damnably quiet. Always a man who feared death, Drag Brashada stood there, white faced, weaving slightly on his booted feet. Stripped of his weapons, his hands were whipped forward, a pair of old handcuffs wrapped around his wrists. It took a light tap on the head with the barrel of the Colt before he would open his mouth for the gag Mohawk placed in it, a big handkerchief with a knot in it, the ends tied tightly behind his head. Now a short rope was looped and tied over the connecting links of the cuffs. Brought down and whipped up in his crotch, Mohawk gave it a few turns also around Brashada's neck.

"Later," he whispered, "you'll need your hands in front of you like that. But remember this. If you let out a sound, the rope will be slacked on top, and you'll come crashing back to the rocks at the foot of the cliffs."

He raised the window behind the table Then they were outside, stepping carefully along the rocky ground, the girl first, a six-shooter in her right hand now, then Brashada, Mohawk following, taking time to close the window behind him. It was narrow and rough here. Mohawk had the muzzle of his six-shooter in Brashada's back, and they moved in the darkness.

They came to the place, but there were three ropes here now instead of one. The

end of one was slipped under the girl's armpits, given a couple of turns and tied securely in front of her. Brashada was given the same treatment, and then Mohawk took care of himself.

"Somebody had a better head than mine," he whispered. "It'll be much faster now, and I'll keep close to you, Drag. If you want to die, try to snatch out that gag or start trying to kick rocks down."

They were soon going up, horses above them being led back in a pine thicket from the rim, with the rope ends tied to their saddle horns. The rocks were almost smooth, ledges plentiful but narrow. Not until they were within six or seven feet of the rim did a single rock fall, and Mohawk did that himself, a chunk of a narrow ledge breaking as he caught it, helping to pull himself up. The rock went down, struck something, bounced outward, and came down on a roof with a hellish crash.

WITH excitement soon stirring from all the thirty-odd houses and huts down there, the rest of it was fast, and yet it was careful. A big horse was brought up. Brashada was loaded in the saddle and tied in place. A couple of stout ropes made his hands fast to the saddle horn.

They were ready even before the sounds of shots came from the narrow north mouth of the cañon, men there on the rim blazing down. Mohawk whistled a few times, and they were heading eastward, the four men up here who had waited for him swinging in behind him. Before they had gone a mile at an easy gallop they were on a long, barren slope. Halfway down, Mohawk looked back and saw the other three men of his little gang come swinging in behind him, a rear guard keeping their distance of about six hundred yards.

This was like the old days, making a fast strike across the Border, then a fast getaway. On a broad flat at the foot of

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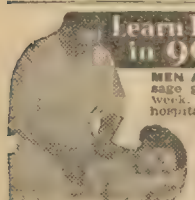

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the slope the pace was increased. Later it became an easier rack, the miles dropping slowly behind them, hills and broken-backed ridges beginning to rise in front of them.

"It looks just too damn easy to suit me, Phil," old Ben Rider was grumbling two hours before dawn. "Drag's got at least forty men back there. 'Course, they may have got a slow getaway, havin' to use their wits to find out just what happened. But some're behind us now, an' just a few soon means the whole gang."

"The cañon was quiet tonight." Mohawk was watching back over his shoulder. "Half the gang's probably out on a raid somewhere. We couldn't have found a better time, Ben." Then, "Look! There's a gang pouring over that high rise back there. It won't be easy from now on."

They had brighter light from the sky now, and bright light was not good. Knowing that the gang behind would not spare a single horse, they increased the pace again, hugging all the shadows they could. At the end of another two miles gunfire broke out behind them, meaning their rear guard had opened up.

"Look!" Ben Rider flung up his hand to point ahead at the end of another thousand yards, while the shooting grew wilder and wilder behind them. "What'n hell's that apourin' outa that break in the ridge?"

"Horses!" yelled Dart Turner. "Damn it, we're hittin' one of Drag's border raids head-on! This is like the ol' days!"

A bullet whistled a warning over their heads a few moments later, coming from two riders at the head of the herd just pouring from the deep break in the ridge ahead. Shots immediately tore back at him, the horses now going like racers, sweat-lather flying. A man in the distance yelled something, doubling up in his saddle, and the rider behind him lost himself completely and, trying to turn, wheeled into the horses behind him.

"Hit 'em hard!" yelled Mohawk. "Turn them back on the riders behind them and let them cut them down!"

Shooting like crazy men, waving hats and old raincoats, they sped on, the horses in the break wheeling, jamming, rearing and pawing. The man who had tried to turn back was wheeling again, coming on desperately, shooting as he came, bullets whistling to the right and left or high overhead, none of them coming close. Before he could come a hundred yards he was rocking back in his saddle, spilling off his horse's rump.

"Hit 'em!" yelled Mohawk again. "The herd's turning!"

It was cold-blooded murder, nothing short of it. Some of the horses in the break had been hit, two of them bawling with pain, terrorizing the others in the jam. Suddenly the jam was breaking, wild-eyed brutes going back and back, distant yells of trailing riders lifting as they looked at the sudden wheel-around and the stampede staring them in the face, a death-trap few could escape.

But it was much worse when Mohawk and the others tore through the break, hoofs pounding and hammering ahead. The hundreds of horses ahead caught the full swing of their stampede. Now they were pouring down a slope, into a narrow valley with steep walls at either side. Ahead of them were fleeing riders. Ahead of those riders was a big herd of cattle, the point and lead riders turning back as if to split through the middle of them. Behind the cattle was the main gang, the right place for them to be if they had to fight off a swarm of irate cowboys and buckaroos trying to recover the herds.

NEVER had Mohawk or any of the others seen cattle turn so quickly. But there were those racing horses bearing down on them, tails and manes flying, shots and yells behind them—hell on the

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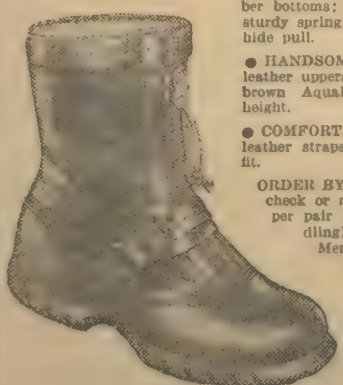

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hoof pouring straight for them. Wheeling and bawling, the slopes at either side just far enough away to let them turn, the cattle were going back, charging straight for the big gang of riders who had been trailing them.

"Push 'em! Push 'em!" Mohawk was still yelling. "We'll send 'em back across the Border!"

Gunfire tore at them a short time later, coming from both sides. It was blaze and bang now. Old Ben Rider's horse bawled and staggered, and Dart Turner swung in beside him, scooping him up just as the horse fell. Then Annie White did the right thing on the spur of a moment. Riding beside the pale Brashada, she reached over, pulled the gag out of his mouth.

"If you want to live you'd better tell them you're with us!" she screamed.

"Don't shoot me!" he cried. Then he was yelling, "This is Drag, yore boss! They've got me a prisoner, tied in a saddle! Kill 'em an' get me away from 'em, but don't shoot me!"

He might have howled his woes to the moon. Few could have heard him, and the fighting continued. Ben Rider was up behind Turner now, going it like hell, the Border looming closer and closer. When they hit it old Dart Turner was flopped across his saddle horn and the mane of his horse, Rider holding him with one hand and shooting with the other. Sweeping down a little slope, they struck water, cattle and horses scattering ahead of them, wild brutes headed for higher ground and the brush ahead, back across the Border.

In the brush, Mohawk wheeled his little bunch, finding sheltering rock around them. The noise now was like being caught in the cross-fire of two armies, for other men were suddenly pouring westward, a faint light beginning to dawn in the east to mark the coming of a new day. In a minute the fight was being carried back across the Border, the remain-

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ing rustlers fleeing, trying to get away on jaded horses, as fresh horses and fresh-fighting men wore them down.

"Go on to Coffin Cañon!" yelled Ben Rider from time to time. "Wipe it out! We've got Drag Brashada here with us!"

The fight died away at dawn, with horses and cattle scattered for miles ahead of the little gang waiting there in the rocks and brush. Then men were coming back, hell in every pair of eyes when they saw Drag Brashada, now a cringing, shaking, slobbering coward.

"Don't let 'em take me, Mohawk!" he blubbered. "Don't let 'em take me! They'll drag me to a bloody skeleton on the end of a rope!"

"They won't!" Mohawk stood there in front of him as he cringed back between two big rocks, others behind him, the girl at Mohawk's left side. "I promised the Rangers I'd come back to them the day I brought you in. They have a dozen ropes waiting for your neck, Drag, and one of them will stretch it."

"Dart Turner's a goner, Phil." Ben Rider came out of the brush now with his hat in his hand, a misty glint in his old eyes. "I guess it was the way he woulda had it. It was the way he allus said he wanted to go when his chips was runnin' out. What'n hell do yuh reckon's goin' to happen to the rest of us?"

"Nothing!" Mohawk clamped his hand on his shoulder. "There's not an honest man on the Border who won't shake all your hands from now on and make you welcome at his table. Hell, Ben, you've more than proved to them that they don't want men like you in jail."

Then he was turning, putting his arm around the girl, trying to tell her that everything was all right. Too tired to listen, she moved closer, putting her head on his bosom, while a cheer suddenly went up around them.

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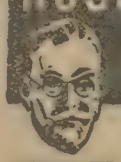

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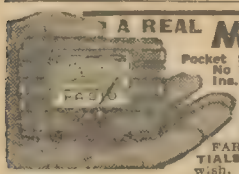

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(Continued from page 101)

crossed the North Platte River. Farther along they made bullboats out of buffalo hides, and floated downstream. As they drifted with the current of the river, a tribe of Indians hailed them from the bank. The Indians seemed friendly, and Glass and his party turned their boats toward shore. When Glass stepped out of the bullboat, he recognized the redmen as of the Arikara nation.

The Indians invited the white men to eat, and held open the flaps of their wickiups. It was a well-laid trap. The Indians had previously had a skirmish with Andrew Henry and his expedition, and one of their chiefs had been killed. Now they struck in retaliation with knives and warclubs. Once more Glass escaped. His was a life of miracles, but two white men lay dead in the Indian village. What became of the other two white men is unknown. Glass never saw or heard of them again.

He traveled alone once more, retracing the trail back. He made his way toward Fort Kiowa. Ill and near starvation much of the time, the torture of the long, grueling march was wearing him down. But he kept on, steadily, slowly, cutting away the miles between him and his sworn enemies.

At last he stumbled into Fort Kiowa. He was on the last lap of his journey, and he was anxious to finish it. The hate that ate at his heart was stronger than ever. He could feel the soft throats of the deserters in his hands, could feel his fingers gripping tighter and tighter, could hear them cry out in pain, and a warm glow of elation kindled his blood.

In June, 1824—nine months later—he reached Fort Atkinson. He asked the first soldier he met if Fitzgerald and Jamie were still at the stockade. Yes, they were here—down at the post. His brain spinning, Glass lurched in a drunken run to

the post. No, they were gone! They had last been seen crossing the parade ground. But the parade ground was deserted. Maybe he was too late, after all. Had they eluded him again?

And then he saw them, laughing and talking, walking into the company store, and all doubt was gone.

He lunged against the heavy door and flung it open. Fitzgerald and Jamie wheeled, staring in disbelief.

"Glass!" Fitzgerald managed to whisper, his face ashen. "Is that—is it really *you*?"

"It's me, all right," Hugh Glass muttered forebodingly. "I've tracked you over half the West—and now I've found you!"

He walked slowly forward. The eyes of the boy Jamie rolled wildly in their sockets. His teeth chattered. Fitzgerald's pallid features were clammy with sweat. They watched the man they had betrayed as if he were a skeleton. Step by step they gave ground, backing away, but soon they would be in a corner, and there was no escape.

THEN Hugh Glass did a strange thing. *He held out his hand.* He had seen too much. He had endured untold hardships, he had traveled over a territory comprising four states and more than eighteen hundred miles, and now that his hour of retribution was near, the seething cauldron within him had burned itself out. His journey of hate was over. Something bigger, finer, was his to hold, and he wanted only to forget.

Thus the incredible saga of Hugh Glass stands today on the pages of time as one of the most dramatic stories of the West. He followed a road of revenge, and in his walking death found at trail's end the strength and vision to live up to the greatness around him.

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(Continued from page 77)

slam into his thigh. His leg wanted to buckle, but he stood there and triggered again. Paulson hit gunhammer, but he didn't pull the trigger. He just folded down into an inert heap.

Bill let himself go. The leg would no longer support him, and he flopped to the ground. As he dropped into the black void, the explosion boomed into his ears.

BILL came to with water slopping in his face. He shoved to a sitting position, held his whirling head in his hands. He glanced to the right. Doc Hagers sat there puffing away at a fresh cigar.

"Where's—Paulson's gang?"

Doc blew out a great cloud of smoke. "Why, some's bein' measured for coffins, some's bein' treated for steam burns and some skeedadled so far they aren't never going to come back."

The moon had come out, and Bill realized that the oil fire was out and that the drilling apparatus was spread out over an acre or so of ground.

"Might be we can put her together again, Bill. Good blacksmith in town. He'll make a new boiler and stuff. Got a lot of wells to be dug, hereabouts. I collected six orders from various people already. Folks is mighty grateful to you. They near had the town burned down, before you stopped us. Also obliged you chased up that little hill after Paulson. He had us whipsawed."

Bill tried to grin. The funny thing was, he knew now why he had gone after Paulson. He had a debt to pay to the people of Dry Gulch. Money had spurred him to risk his neck more than once. But they had shown him how people will risk their necks for something besides money. He felt good inside.

"How about a beer, Bill?"

Bill grinned as he limped after the oldster over to the cafe.

THE END

(Continued from page 8)

Ralston employed Henry Janin, one of the greatest mining experts, to look over the fields, and William C. Lent said that Janin told him that twenty rough laborers could wash out a million dollars in a single month.

ONE-TENTH of the stones from the sack left for "security" was taken to Tiffany and Company in New York. Mr. Tiffany and his lapidary pronounced the gems worth $150,000. Then the rest at home in that sack left for "security" against cash payments, must be worth about $1,500,000!

More cash was then given Arnold and Slack by Ralston, Lent and Asbury Harpending until the men had received $660,000. Arnold and Slack then sold out.

Ralston interested twenty-five associates, who each paid $80,000, making a two million dollar initial payment into the Bank of California to form the ten million dollar company "The San Francisco and New York Mining and Commercial Company."

Sargent's Mining Bill was passed through the Senate and appeared May 18, 1872—at quite some cost in order to protect title to fields.

Henry Janin's report was given to the world and all the world was excited about the sudden discovery of diamond fields in America, where there were also sapphires, rubies and emeralds.

Then the bubble burst!

Clarence King, a noted geologist, head of the Fortieth Parallel Survey, sent a telegram to Ralston, from a small station in Wyoming, on the 11th of November 1872, stating that the fields were fraudulent and agreeing to take a group of experts over the fields and prove it to them. This caused wild excitement and a group of experts were gotten together at once.

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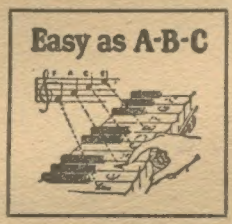

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diamonds stuffed into crevices of rocks, also ant hills covered with ruby and diamond dust. Asbury Harpending, one of the financiers who had been duped, said later: "Undoubtedly holes were made in the soil with sharp iron rods, gems were dropped in the holes, which were closed with a hard stamp of the foot and the first winter rain obliterated every trace that remained of human agency. Wherever we worked the ground was in place.

A stone was found partly cut and stones were found under the surface of the earth. Also, something that the experts had forgotten was that diamonds, sapphires, emeralds and rubies do not form in the same matrix but in an entirely different geological formation.

Ralston paid back $80,000 to each of the twenty-five men he had interested. This was two million out of his own fortune besides many hundreds of thousands he had advanced.

Arnold's picture was sent to Europe and he was identified as the man who had bought low grade stones in quantities. It was estimated later, that the entire "salting" cost about thirty-five thousand dollars.

Immediately after the investigations started, John Slack disappeared and was never heard from again and it was generally believed that he met with foul play.

Arnold retired with his loot to his home town of Elisabethtown, Hardin county, Kentucky.

He intended to live a long life in plenty but his ill-gotten gains brought him bad luck immediately.

Arnold was a miner, but he decided to open up a bank. This caused rivalry among the citizens which led to a duel. Arnold was injured and pneumonia set in and he died in the latter part of 1873 only a year or two after he started his villainy.

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